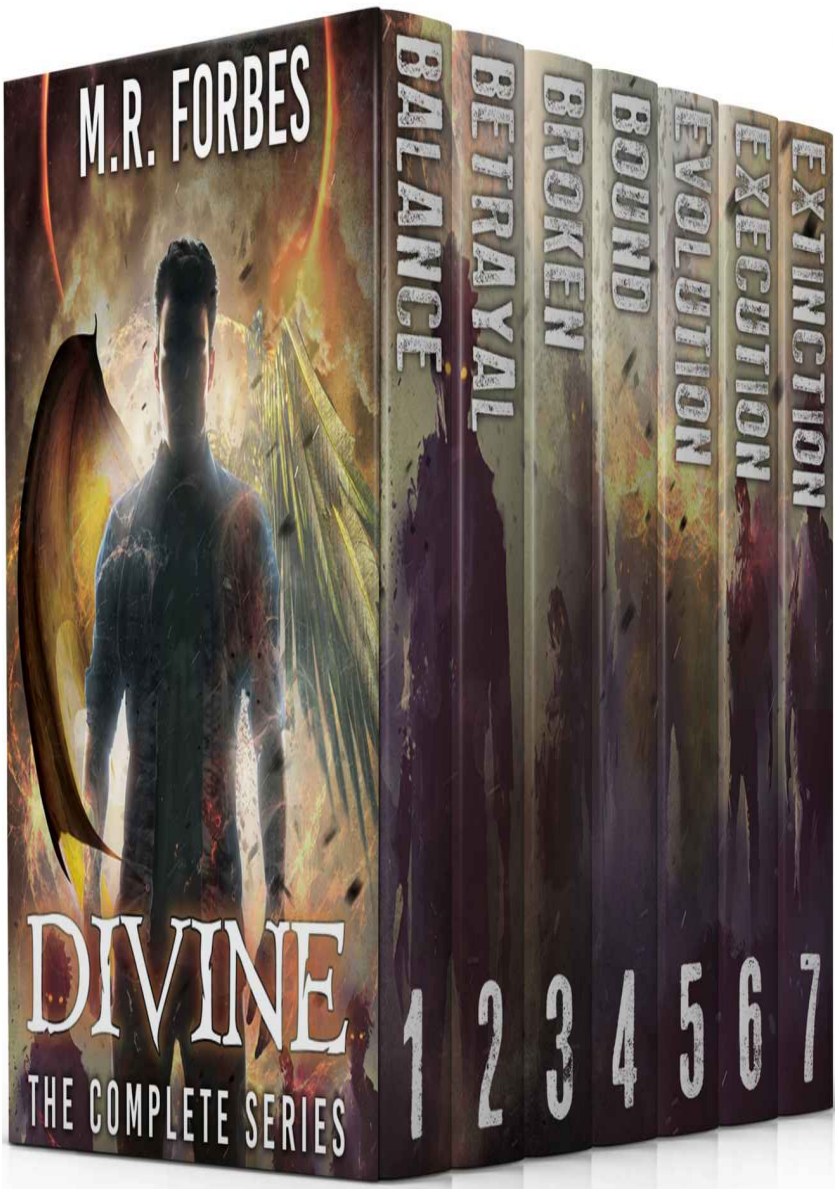
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Divine

The Complete Series

M.R. Forbes

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Published by Quirky Algorithms
Seattle, Washington

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Book One: Balance

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1

There was something about the way she moved; the feline grace of her body, the softness of her steps. The way her arms swayed languidly back and forth as she sauntered past me. She had black hair that fell to her hips in a single silken flow, blue eyes, olive skin, a pair of tights, a fitted red sweater, and a something extra that put her at the top of the 'out-of-your-league' Christmas wish list. What's more, she was in a Museum! By herself! Yeah, I stared. No, she didn't notice.

It was my second week on the job at the Museum of Natural History, my first job post-incarceration. It was a long story, but the short, simple version had to do with being a too-social computer geek and other people's credit cards. I had been lucky to get such cake work. Normally the Museum didn't hire ex-cons, but they'd imported a special "first time ever outside the Vatican, limited time only" exhibit of ancient Catholic relics, prompting them to beef up staff. The nature of my crime hadn't been violent or physical in any way, shape, or form, so they were willing to look past it. My job was simple, stand around and make sure nobody even tried to

breathe funny on the artifacts.

Today, I was guarding cups. Excuse me, chalices. One in particular, a simple wooden one that sat at the end of the exhibit hall on a special pedestal surrounded by a rope, ten feet of space, tamper-proof, bullet-proof glass, and surveilled by every type of technology you could imagine. They said it was the cup Jesus drank out of at the Last Supper, the Holy Grail. It looked like it had come from 'The Last Crusade'. Lucas hadn't been off by much.

So far, the job had been as boring as I had assumed it would be. Every day from nine to twelve and one to close I would stand at the entrance to the exhibit room, watch the people go in and out, and occasionally wander up and down the aisles to make sure nobody got fingerprints on the glass enclosures. My greatest adversaries in this new career were children. They liked to touch things.

A particularly ambitious offender caught the corner of my eye, and I was forced to stop staring at the girl, who was approaching the wooden chalice at the end of the room. She seemed really interested in it. Very sexy.

Annoyed by the interruption to my creepy stalking, I walked over to where the little boy was standing, his hands and face pressed up against the glass. I peeked down at the label, *Diamond Chalice, 771 A.D* . There was more, but I didn't need to read it, I already had over a hundred times. It was a fancy piece of work that had been gifted to the Pope by Charlemagne. It tended to be a favorite with women, and even more so with kids. My guess was that the 'ooh shiny' part of his underdeveloped mind had taken over.

"Excuse me young sir," I said, kneeling down to get my face at a level with his. "The rules clearly state there will be no touching of the glass."

He looked at me, and I pointed my finger over at the 'DO NOT TOUCH' sign. He laughed and ran off to find his mother, who had moved on with little concern for the location of her brood. I watched him go, skirting through the line of adults and latching onto her hand. She looked down at him, and he pointed back to where I was still crouching. She gave me a Medusa look and yanked the little tattletale forward. What was with parents these days anyway? God forbid their kids actually follow the rules. Wait... did I just say that?

I was contemplating the human aging process and that weird

phenomenon that occurs when we somehow begin to turn into our parents, when a collective murmur caught my attention. I stood and looked around for the source. Damn!

The cutie with the black hair was inside the rope line! Not really that impressive I know, but this was a major infraction in the Museum Guard Handbook. At least it would give me an excuse to talk to her. I began pushing my way through the gathering crowd, who were complaining of course that she was obstructing their view.

"Excuse me, miss," I said to her back.

She had reached the tamper-proof, bulletproof glass, and was standing there in a very thoughtful pose, her left hand up to her chin, her right tapping on her hip. She ignored me, which was about what I would expect from someone like her. I picked up my radio and called for backup. I didn't have the authority to move her. Only the senior guards could do that.

"Hey Jimmy," I said. "I have a little situation over in the chalice exhibit. There's a girl here who thinks she has exclusive viewing rights to the Last Supper cup." There was a short silence before the reply.

"Chalice, Landon. It’s a chalice. I'll be right there." He sounded like I had woken him up. I probably had.

I broke the rope barrier and approached the girl. She still didn't move. "Miss, are you okay?" I asked.

Better to play it sensitive. She didn't react at all to the sound of my voice. I didn't expect much attention from someone like her, but to treat me like I wasn't there? That was a little much. I flicked my eyes back towards the entrance. It should only take Jimmy a minute to get over from the office. When I looked back at the girl, she was cutting through the glass with her fingertip.

"Uhh..." My mind lost a step at the sight, tripping over itself and sending the rest of my body into a spastic overload. Does not compute. I picked up the radio again.

"Jimmy, where the hell are you," I yelled, my voice going up an octave. I looked again. Her finger appeared more like a claw now, and it really was cutting through the glass; the bulletproof, tamper-proof glass. The alarm started ringing.

Jimmy finally trundled into the exhibition hall, his breathing heavy as he pulled up next to me. Old… Check. Overweight… Check. Out of shape… Did you doubt? He was your standard issue

Museum guard.

"Geez Landon," he said. "You didn't tell me she was hot." He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry miss but you’ll have to go back behind the rope line.”

There was a blur of red, and the next thing I knew, Jimmy was on the floor sans one appendage. Chaos entered the building.

The crowd that had gathered to watch the show began to scream. I began to scream and backpedal as the girl turned and looked at me. Her eyes were yellow; her teeth were elongated into fangs. It was straight out of an issue of Fangoria. She growled, blasted the rest of the tamper-proof, bulletproof, glass into dust with her fist, grabbed the Grail, and ran towards the spectators - all in the space of three seconds.

Still backpedaling, my legs hit the rope, and I tumbled backward. The last thing I saw was the devil-girl dropping a package that looked all too familiar from any number of action movies. There was a loud pop and a lot of heat. As I felt my life slipping away, I could hear the screams and smell the cooked flesh. I wasn't the only one who died that day.

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2

I came to, if you could call it that, with my face literally buried in the sand. My head was pounding, and my heart was racing. Wasn't I supposed to be dead? I clearly recalled the white light, the fading away of my senses, and an overwhelming sense of freedom.

I picked my head up and looked around through the sand that was stuck to my eyelashes. I was lying on a beach, wearing a pair of board shorts. I was alone. If this was Heaven, it was going to be a lonely eternity.

Who was she, I wondered, forgetting my predicament for a moment. The girl had killed me, but I was still thinking about her. Did that make me crazy? I pushed myself to my feet and began brushing off the more tenacious grains of sand, then took a deep breath and tried to think. Okay, so I had just died in an explosion, I was standing on a beach completely alone, and for some reason I wasn't afraid. In fact, other than the headache, I felt pretty darn good.

"Landon Hamilton." The voice was old, deep, and smooth as jazz. It scared the crap out of me. I spun around.

The man had appeared out of nowhere. He was a good six inches shorter than me, middle-aged, gaunt but muscular, and bald. He had a short white goatee and pale blue eyes. He was wearing a tailored black suit.

"Are you God?" I asked.

He gave me a “you're an idiot” smile. "Thankfully, no. You can call me Mr. Ross. I'm the Collector."

Oh. "I am dead right?" I asked.

He nodded.

"A beach?"

"Look around son," he said. "Earth, water, air, fire; the feel of sand between your toes, cooling off in the water from the heat of the sun. The fresh salt sea air… Where else does humanity so perfectly merge with the most basic natural elements?"

It made sense, in a nothing-is-really-making-sense sense. "Okay. So, I'm pretty sure this isn't Hell, unless you're tricking me into thinking this isn't Hell, and then it turns out it actually is. If this is Heaven, I don't know… don't take this personally but, it’s kind of a bummer."

Mr. Ross sighed. "You may not be much, but if you’re all we’ve got I guess we’ll have to make a go of it. Now, please try to stop making a fool of yourself. Let's go."

He started walking. I followed behind.

"Wait a second. Where are we going?" He didn't answer. "Mr. Ross!" Nothing.

What did he expect? Two minutes earlier I had seen a beautiful woman turn into some kind of monster right before she blew me to smithereens. I was dead, but I was standing on a beach with one of the Blues Brothers. It had left me a little disoriented, confused, and giddy. I was finding it hard to calm down, so I was getting a little stupid.

We were walking, but I couldn't see where we were going. Ahead of us was a large sand dune, over it the clear blue horizon. There still wasn't another soul around, and Mr. Ross wouldn't say anything. He led. I followed. Until, for no apparent reason, he stopped.

"It'll be okay son," he said. "It happens to everyone. Just let it."

"What happens?" I asked.

Then it did. The reality. The crushing weight of what had actually occurred, the cold realization that I was no longer part of

the land of the living. That my mother was going to be hearing from the police sometime soon that her son was a casualty of some kind of terrorist attack, disgruntled employee, or major nut-job. That I was never going to get married, have children, graduate college, or travel to Europe. Heaven or Hell, I was out of the game.

That's the simple description. The pain that ensued was a hundred times worse. Regret, guilt, anger, envy, I think I went through every single human emotion in the space of a couple of minutes. I curled up on the beach and cried my eyes out, the maelstrom of feeling overwhelming my senses and leaving me there for ten minutes, an hour, a month? There was no way to measure it except through pain. It felt like it lasted another lifetime. Mr. Ross just stood there while it happened, waiting for it to pass, as I was sure he had done plenty of times before.

When it did, the resulting reality was cathartic. At least I still had something. Something I could build upon, strive for, be challenged with. I may have lost my vessel, but the soul was still sentient. I got back to my feet, wiped my eyes with my hand, and looked at Mr. Ross.

"I'm ready," I said. He didn't say anything, but he looked pleased, as if I had passed some kind of test.

When we reached the top of the sand dune, we were greeted by nothing but white, empty space. Who knew that nothing could be so amazing? I gawked.

"I've seen this at least a million times," Mr. Ross said. I believed it. "I'm still amazed by it every time."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Think of the beach as a staging area. I'm the Collector. I pick you up here. From staging, you can go to any number of places depending on how you've been assigned. Most people get moved on to a secondary staging area where they're met with by an acquaintance if we have one available. We try to find somebody who's already learned the ropes to help them with the transition. If they don't know anybody, or maybe nobody ever liked them, they get moved on to orientation, which is divvied up by religious belief. A few get reassigned up or down, usually because of a 'clerical error'." He actually did the air quotes. "You're a special case. You get to meet the Boss."

Special case? Up or down? Boss? Too many questions, but I never got to ask them. He put his hand on my back and shoved me

into the nothingness.

When we came out on the other side, we were standing on a busy city street that reminded me of New York. It was an instantaneous thing, a smooth transition. Right foot forward to land on the sidewalk, left foot still planted in the sand. Thankfully my clothes matched the environment, a pair of jeans, black t-shirt, and a leather blazer. I bet I looked cool.

"New York?" I asked.

"You tell me," Mr. Ross replied. "You made it."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll let the Boss explain it to you." He motioned me towards the building we were standing in front of. I looked up at the huge mass of glass and steel stretching as far up into the sky as my neck would crane. A hundred stories, at least. As we slipped through the revolving glass door, I noticed a small sign etched in the glass in a really fancy script.

Alighieri Corp.

The inside of the building was incredible. A huge reception area with a ceiling that easily reached two hundred feet, a solid wall of glass to the left and right, and a massive tapestry hanging behind a semi-circular reception desk where a young brunette was typing something into a computer. On either side of the desk were two pairs of elevators. Mr. Ross swerved left and hit the ‘up’ button. I took a closer look at the tapestry while we waited.

It looked familiar. A man in the foreground wearing a red robe and a funny hat, holding open a book. To the left a bunch of naked people dancing their way downward towards a fiery pit and the Devil. To the right a walled city, and in the background a spiraling mountain that led upwards to a ribboned sky.

I turned to Ross. "Is that?" I didn't get to finish. The elevator doors opened, and he pushed me inside.

"The Boss," he mumbled, telling me to keep quiet and save the questions. The elevator doors binged closed, and we started rising, slowly at first but I could feel us building speed. I tried to organize my questions into some kind of logical order, but logic was failing me and besides, the ride was too short. I felt my stomach lurch as we decelerated way too quickly. Could dead people vomit?

The elevator doors opened, and I stepped out, feeling the

softness of thick carpeting beneath my leather boots. That was nothing compared to the view. The entire floor was surrounded by what seemed like a solid pane of completely invisible glass, and I could see out for miles. The angle was no good to look down on the city itself, but I could see now that tall mountains, with snow-covered slopes and plenty of jagged peaks, ringed us. At the foot of the mountains was a thick forest, and before that the tail end of the city, just as dense as I imagined the area around this building to be. There were no roads leading out of the city, at least not that I could see.

About fifty feet forward, directly in front of the elevator was an ornate mahogany desk. Sitting behind the desk in an equally ornate chair was a tall, thin man with short white hair. He was turned so I could only catch his profile, but I could tell even from here that he was wearing a finely tailored suit, and a heavy gold Rolex dangled from his bony wrist. Mr. Ross led me over to him.

The man spun the chair to face us as we approached. His lips spread in a tight smile, and he leaned himself onto the desk to drag himself to his feet. He was shorter than I had thought, standing a full head below me. He stuck out his hand.

"Buongiorno, Signore," he said. I took his hand in my own, making an effort to be firm, but not break anything. He felt like he would crack under the slightest pressure. "My name is Dante."

He had a soft Italian accent, but it was different than I was familiar with. By that I mean, not like in the Godfather. "Landon Hamilton," I said. I was sure he already knew that, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Of course," he said with a laugh. He dropped my hand and waved me to a chair that hadn't been there a second before. "Please, take a seat." He looked at Mr. Ross. "Thank you, Mr. Ross. You can go. I believe you have another pickup."

Mr. Ross looked at his watch. "Yes," he said. He didn't leave by elevator. Instead, he just vanished.

Dante eased himself back down into the chair. "Now, where were we? Ah yes, you are surely wondering what is going on? Would that be a good estimation?"

"Dead on," I said. He stifled a grin.

"I'm sure you've already surmised that you have left behind the state of existence often referred to as 'being alive.' You did so in

quite a violent manner, in fact, being blown to bits by a certain 'hottie.'" He stifled another grin. At least he was amused. "Believe me when I say you should be glad for the fact that it was quick. Better to come to a sudden end than to suffer."

That might actually be true, but I was twenty-three years old. "Better to live another, I don't know, fifty, sixty years," I said.

"So you think," he replied. His jovial expression faded somewhat. "Things are not as simple as they may seem from that side of the coin, Landon. Not simple at all."

"I really have no idea what you're talking about," I said

"No, you wouldn't. Are you familiar with the Catholic Church?" he asked.

Familiar? My mother dragged me to Church every Sunday morning for most of my childhood. I had spent my adulthood teetering between a healthy fear of God and a complete lack of belief in anything special. Considering that second part had already been proven wrong, maybe I should reconsider the first.

"I spent a year as an alter boy," I replied.

Dante stood up again and began pacing the room. After a few trips back and forth behind the desk, he spoke again.

"It's a lie," he said.

"What?" I wasn't sure I had heard him right.

He took a deep breath and sighed. "It's a lie, Landon. Not a total fabrication, of course, there is a God, and as you may have determined Heaven and Hell are real. So is the place in between."

That was one question answered. "So I'm in Purgatory?" I asked.

"You're in Purgatory," he confirmed. "But it's not what you think. None of it is."

I had a feeling he was going to say that. Who knew it took eternal sleep to be woken up? "Do you care to explain?"

Dante resumed his pacing. "It is difficult to explain, Signore. We are speaking of thousands of years of history. I will start with the simplest description." He paused, trying to think of how to say what he wanted to say so I would understand.

"In all things there is balance," he said. "It is the single most important law of the Universe. If something expands, it must contract, if it goes up, it must come down. Even God must adhere to this law because it transcends even Him. This is the reason for Purgatory. It is necessary for the balance of goodness, and evilness. When God created mankind and named it good, he tried to push

this balance to his own ends. Such things are not to be."

I knew some of the stories in the Bible. "The serpent."

"Yes," he shouted, smiling and clapping his hands together. "Not a serpent of course. That is just a story in a book, a representation of the truth, a simplification much as I am attempting now. Mankind could never have been inherently good, or inherently evil because the Laws of Balance would not allow it. To use an analogy you may understand, the more he pushed these boundaries, the more feedback he received. He created the seraphs, the angels, to try to steer us back on the path of righteousness, and they began to fall."

"The Devil?" I guessed.

"As he is known in some circles," Dante said. "He was an angel once, but he was corrupted by temptation. He sewed dissent amongst the ranks of the angels, making false promises and filling their ears with believable lies. He gained immeasurable power before God realized his one and only mistake, the only one he could ever make. God restored the balance by giving Hell to the Devil. He then created Purgatory to put some distance between the two, in order to minimize the damage that could be caused by shifting tides. So it was for many thousands of years."

"But…" I knew there had to be one. There always was, wasn't there?

Dante sighed again. He walked over to the window and gazed out at the mountains. "The Devil and his minions thrive on chaos. He gains nothing from balance and lusts only for power. He twists mankind to his will when he can, and forever hopes to tip the scales in his favor.

For many years, this was as expected, and thus the balance was held steady. Two thousand years ago, a problem arose. God decided to get back in the game. He was unhappy with the status quo, unhappy to have been denied in anything. The war began anew with the birth of His son."

I rose to my feet and went to stand at the window with Dante. His eyes darted over to look at me, and a surprised expression spread across his face, and then vanished.

"Jesus was crucified," I said. "Wouldn't that have rebalanced the equation?"

"Crucified yes, but also martyred. His death created the underpinnings of the Catholic Church, the most powerful of God's

armies. I was once a staunch ally of the Church. I fell in love with an angel and was granted a rare opportunity to visit all three realms. Heaven is a wondrous and beautiful place, incredible to behold, and Hell is just as opposite."

Now I was really confused. "So why not stay in Heaven?"

"There is a war going on, Signore. It may seem that there are only two sides, but there is a third, and it has very few soldiers. If the Devil gets his due, the world of man will fall into chaos and ruin. It will be ruled by violence, death, and famine. All of humanity will be hunted to extinction by the creatures of the Underworld."

"So we root for good right?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It is certainly tempting to do so, but if the world is overwhelmed with good then God will have leave to do as he wishes. You have heard of the Rapture?" I nodded. "He will take only his most faithful servants up to Heaven, and he will destroy everything else in order to make right his miscalculation. Do not think badly of Him for it, Landon, it is not for any ill-will to us, but because that is His nature. He does not understand that there is something greater than Him, and as such He will lay challenge to this universal law. He cannot see that He is destined only to fail in this. In any case, this is why there must be a third side, and this is why we fight for it. If either good or evil wins, the world as you know it will cease to be."

It was a scary thought, and a hard one to accept. My mother had spent my entire life teaching me to be good, to obey the word of God, to hold the moral high ground. Okay, I hadn't exactly mastered it, but I tried to be a decent person overall. My incarceration was for identity theft and fraud. I had tried to cheat the system, not hurt anybody. Yet, now I was being told that by doing good I was threatening all of humanity?

"How can it be wrong to do good in the world?" I asked.

"It isn't wrong, for the balance must be maintained. For every old lady you help with their groceries, there is someone being teased for their appearance. For every prayer you send to God, there is a curse being uttered. Such things are of utmost importance, and thus the infinite circle continues."

It made sense in a way I did not completely understand but was able to accept. The more I thought about how the world did its business - war, humanitarianism, greed, philanthropy, stealing and

charity, the more I came to understand the pattern. I moved to stand directly in front of Dante, so I could look him in the eye. I squeezed in between him and the view.

"Okay, so everything is in balance, and God and Beelzebub are duking it out to see who can take home the whole pie. So then, here you are trying to get in the middle of it and prevent a clear winner?"

He seemed uncomfortable having me so close. He backed up a few steps. "Yes. Exactly."

Something was out of whack with the story. “But if the Universe forces all things into balance, then shouldn’t it be able to take care of their attempts to tip the scales on its own?”

Dante smiled wearily. “The Universe works on its own time, not ours. A victory by either side will throw the balance, and the Universe will put it back in place. When? How? That is not for us to know, and it will matter to us little for we will all be gone.”

It was time for the million-dollar question. "How many people know about this?"

He knew the question was coming. He didn't want to answer it. He knew I wasn't going to like the answer.

He did another one of those big sighs before he replied. "Other than the angels and demons?” he asked. I nodded. “Counting you and me? Four."

Mr. Ross had said I was special. What made me so special that I got to know this anyway? "Why so few?"

"Please, Landon, let us sit again." He waved me back over to the chair and returned to the desk. I was hesitant to follow him, but I needed answers. It was like an itch that started at my feet, ran up my legs, and disappeared deep into my soul. Once I had plopped down into the chair, he picked up a remote control and faced it towards the window in front of me. It became a gigantic screen. Depicted on it was Dante, looking much the same as he did today. The video relayed the scene to me exactly as he described it.

"For me, it was an accident. I was never supposed to stay in this place. The caretaker at the time had tired of the fighting and wanted to get out. He could never leave Purgatory of course, but he could escape his memories of all that had occurred. As I traveled through this realm, he reached out and touched my arm, and by doing so passed all of his knowledge on to me. Once I knew the truth, I could not abandon the mortal world to the end I knew

would otherwise come."

The scene in the video changed. It showed Mr. Ross lying naked on a beach. The same beach I had arrived on.

"Mr. Ross is the next," he said. "He told me he was a tax collector for King Henry the Second. In those days, new souls had to find their own way off the beach, but he came straight to my front door so to speak. He knew who I was, I don't really know how. He started asking me questions about Heaven, and about Hell. Nobody else had ever asked me these questions. Everyone else lands on the beach, suffers their Regrets, and moves on to spend their eternity much the same as they lived their lives. I was so grateful for someone to share this burden with, I told him everything I knew. Ever the Collector, he felt there was more information out there, something more that I didn't know."

Now the scene shifted to Mr. Ross torturing a tan, golden-haired man. It was disturbing, and I couldn't bear to watch it. "He knew how to get information. As a Collector, he could collect anything. He found out that we did not have to be bystanders in this war, that there were others that could accept the truth. That there were others who could possibly even prevent total annihilation." He paused and took a sip of water for a cup that had just appeared on the desk.

"Thirsty?" he asked. I shook my head, so he continued.

"We waited over a hundred years for the first to arrive," he said. "Mr. Ross collected every single soul in order to be sure not to miss her. When she came, we knew her right away because she wasn't naked."

Not naked, of course. "What?"

Dante let himself grin this time. "Almost everyone who dies comes to the afterlife unclothed. I did, Mr. Ross did. She didn't. Neither did you." He paused dramatically, or maybe so I would make the connection. Special. Me. Right. "What it meant was that she was Aware. Not on a conscious level at first, but Aware just the same. She could exert her will upon Purgatory itself, and it bent in response. She didn't want to be nude, and so she wasn't."

I looked down at the clothes I was wearing. "Mr. Ross said I had made this," I told him, waving my hand at the room.

"That is somewhat true," he said. "But not completely. Everyone who dies experiences Purgatory in a different way. It has no specific shape or form, but rather is consumed by each individual according

to what they believe it will be. For me, this place is typical to 14th Century Italy. The others here are peasants, merchants, and farmers. In my mind you would normally be a knight. However, your will has changed this place to something you are more familiar with. While you are here, I am a CEO, sitting in the penthouse of a modern skyscraper. You have made this my reality. If you went outside the people around you would find themselves in this city you have created, and many would suffer some level of disorientation before they would be able to adjust to the change."

I looked out at the city again with new eyes. This was all a figment of my imagination? "How far does it reach?"

He shook his head. "There is really no way to know. It could be all of Purgatory has changed because you are here. Most of the inhabitants here will not remember the change once you have gone."

I wanted to test this. I wanted to have some proof that what I was hearing was true, to see what Dante saw. I wanted to be in his world. I tried to picture a medieval castle, a throne, and a large timber table. Nothing happened.

"You don't have control of it," Dante said, as if he had been reading my mind. "Not yet. Your mind created this because it was familiar. It will hold onto it tightly until you can convince it that it doesn't have to."

"I feel like Neo," I said.

"Hardly," Dante replied.

Something was nagging at me. Something he had said before I tried to turn this place into Camelot. "Once I've gone? Isn't Purgatory, you know… Forever?"

"No," Dante said. "Purgatory is never forever, unless you choose it to be. It is where the souls who have not chosen a side or who have not earned a place in either Heaven or Hell are sent until such a time as they do. Time is not observed the same way here, so such endeavors can take many hundreds if not thousands of Earth years. And yes, you will leave this place if you choose to accept who and what you are."

There it was again. "Who and what am I?"

"You are a diuscrucis, a crossbreed of angel and demon. Not directly of course, but somewhere in your lineage, buried deep within your roots. The blood of the creatures of dark and the creatures of light flows through your veins. Moreover, the balance

of this mixture is precise, or you would not be here now. Almost all diuscrucis are inherently good or inherently evil, depending on which side is more dominant. But you... You are a perfect balance of every variable in the equation. The odds are so infinitesimally small that it has happened twice in a millennia is beyond words."

I was expecting something grandiose. After all, Dante had said there was only one other like me that he had ever met. This went beyond grandiose though. This went deep into impossible. You would think a guy would know if his grandma were Satan's handmaiden. If my day had gone any differently, I would never have believed it. I did though. There was something telling me that I should.

Dante had read my expression, and he watched me curiously as I worked through acceptance of my family tree. "You would know if I was lying Landon," he said. "That is one of the traits you inherited from your good side. It is what allows me to tell you all of this, and know that you will accept it and believe it."

I did know he was telling me the truth. "If that side helps me to recognize lies, does the other make me better at telling them?"

It was part of the balance. That deviousness had led me to hacking, to stealing, and ultimately to my arrest. The thought bothered me.

"Wait a second," I said. "You speak of balance, good, and evil as if we have no choice in the matter. Are you saying that every decision I make is predetermined in order to keep me right in the center?"

When I asked the question, Dante flinched as though he had been struck. His wide eyes narrowed and dimmed, and he took on a look of sadness. "Everyone has the freedom to choose their own path. Charis did."

"Charis?" She was the other one like me. I knew it by his reaction. "What happened to her?"

He paused before he answered. "She made a choice. She isn't with us anymore."

I could tell by the way he said it that it was all he wanted to say. There was no reason to push him. I had gotten what I wanted.

"Then I guess the burning question is, what exactly am I doing here?" I asked.

Dante's demeanor changed again, turning him back into the energetic and lighthearted man that had greeted me.

"You are in a unique position, but as I have said it is your choice. The battle between good and evil rages on; the angels want the perfection that God had envisioned, and the demons aim to mangle the world to satiate their desire for chaos and destruction. Mankind has been caught in the middle, and they have no one to fight on their side. No one to assure that the balance is maintained so that they may continue to have control of their own future."

"So you think that I can help humanity deal with this somehow?" I was doubtful. Maybe I could spot a lie and dress myself in cool clothes, but I had a feeling that wouldn't help much against Satan or Saint Michael.

"I know you can, Signore," he said. "You are stronger than you know. Shedding your mortal skin has opened your being up to all of the power that it is due a diuscrucis." He leaned up over the desk and looked me right in the eyes, a look that delved deep into me. "ALL of the power." He seemed very satisfied.

I would do this. I had to do this. The need was an unbreakable iron grip on my soul. It was what I had been born to do, had died to do. It was frightening, exciting, and impossible to resist. It wasn't about the power that Dante believed I had. It was about nature. My nature. How many people ever get to find out where they stand and connect with it so completely? According to Dante, even God Himself was being driven by His basest nature. I had asked about choice, discovered I had none, and realized that it was okay because I didn't care.

"So what happens next?" I asked.

Dante smiled. "When someone who leans to good leaves Purgatory, they go to Heaven. Someone leaning evil goes to Hell. Someone who doesn't lean at all, they go…"

He didn't finish. He didn't have a chance to. The solid glass window I had been enjoying looking out of earlier exploded inward, showering us both in glass. I backed away and raised my arms to cover my head. Dante didn't move at all, he just turned his head to watch the interlopers make their entrance. The glass seemed to bounce off of him. It took me a moment to realize it hadn't hurt me either.

The interlopers looked like angels, but I knew on my new instinct that they weren't. Maybe once upon a time before the greedy promises and lies had changed their hearts, but not now. They may have been brothers, both with long silver and white hair,

ebony skin, and sharp red eyes. They were wearing matching leather dusters with black leather vests over purple shirts and dark wash jeans. Each was holding what looked to me like a samurai sword. They glared at Dante with disgust and looked at me as if I were nothing more than an ant to be stepped on.

"You have no rights here," Dante said to them. He shifted over to put himself between them and me. "If any harm comes to me you will be in breach of the Treaty."

The two dark angels stepped forward as one. "We have no intention of harming you Alighieri," the one on the left said. "We only want him."

I felt my heart jump into my throat. What was this frail old man going to do to keep those swords from taking my head? This was turning really bad, really fast.

Dante turned his back on them and leaned in close to me. "I don't know how they found about you already," he said. "Take this." He handed me a... Cell phone? "Mr. Ross will get you out of here."

"Wait... what am I supposed to do?"

Dante whispered something and put his hand to my forehead. The entire room started spinning. One of the dark angels pushed Dante out of the way. The other raised his sword and smiled, taking pleasure in his killing strike. I closed my eyes so I didn't have to watch myself die for the second time in one day. I wondered how that was even possible, sure I was about to find out.

I felt a pair of arms wrap around me. I smelled something burning. The blow never came. I opened my eyes. I was standing on the torch of the Statue of Liberty.

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I stood there for a few minutes, trying to make sense of everything that had happened within what had felt like only a couple of hours. Somehow, I had been brought back to life. I worried first that I was one of the undead, a zombie or something, but I could feel the pulse beneath my fingers, and I was cold in the night air. I was still wearing the same clothes, which I was grateful for because it was REALLY cold. Hadn't I died in the summer? How much time had passed? What was I supposed to do? Where should I start?

I looked at the phone Dante had given me. It was a newer model, a smartphone. I lifted it up to my chest and turned it on. Along with the standard assortment of apps was one titled 'Landon'.

I thought about opening it there, but I was freezing. I edged my way around the torch to the small door that led down into the main stairwell. Please be open. It was. I slipped inside and closed the door; glad to be out of the bitter winter wind. Not that it was a whole lot warmer inside, but at least I was out of the elements. I descended the ladder and made my way out to the staircase, then sat down on a step and opened the app.

Buongiorno Landon,

I'm sorry that you will have to learn in this way. It means that we've been compromised to Mephistopheles, and his Collectors have come for you. Be thankful that I had suspected a traitor in our midst and have prepared this guide to help you on your journey to discovering your full potential and making good on your promise. I will speak with you again once I can be assured that it will not lead them to you. In the meantime, if you do nothing else, read the entry titled "Rules.'"Following the rules within will keep you alive. Yes, you are 'alive', although not in the manner you are used to. You are Awake, and a full member of the Divine, with all of the rights, privileges and power that comes with it. You will find out what that means in time. Stay safe my friend.

Ciao,

Dante

There was a menu item at the bottom that said "Rules." I pressed it and read them.

* * *

1. Check the inside pocket of your jacket.

2. Find somewhere safe to read the rest of this guide.

3. Do not travel at night.

4. Stay aware of your surroundings. You will be able to recognize the Divine. Most of the Divine will also be able to recognize you. Only the weakest will be fooled by glamour.

5. When in doubt, hide. They will know what you are, and they will try to kill you. You have no allies.

6. Both sides have human allies. The agents of good are called the Touched. The agents of evil are called the Turned. They have some power that has been transferred to them by the Divine, but they are still mortal. They will try to kill you, but will not recognize you so easily.

7. You can kill an angel with anything that has been cursed.

8. You can kill a demon with anything that has been blessed.

9. You cannot kill a Divine with anything that is not Divine.

10. Do not lose hope and do not give up. You are special.

* * *

That was it. A few bits of advice that read more like instructions, and a few helpful tips that may or may not keep me alive. That part about killing angels and demons; I couldn't even fathom the concept, but if they really were going to be out to kill me, I guess I wouldn't have a choice.

I reached into the pocket of the blazer, grabbing onto a large wad of paper with a familiar feel. I unfolded it, and a wedge of blank plastic the size and shape of a credit card fell out. What was I going to do with a blank card? I tucked it back into the pocket and spread the cash. It was mainly twenties and hundreds; four thousand dollars. That wouldn't last me too long, at least not in the Big Apple, but it was better than nothing.

Rule one taken care of, now what about rules two and three? It was nighttime, and Lady Liberty seemed safe enough for now. The problem was, come morning this place would be crawling with people, and I didn't know if I should be afraid of that or not. How many Others were there? Did they mix in with the population, or keep to themselves? What about their allies? I could just picture Joe Blow the Tourist laying eyeballs on me and literally unleashing Hell. Of course, I was on Liberty *Island* . There was zero way I was going to get out without getting on a boat. There was no way I was going to get on a boat without any other people on it.

Decision made, I figured it best to at least head towards the bottom of the Statue, so if nothing else I'd be set to make a break for the ferry right away. Once I had gotten off the island, I would find a hole in the wall somewhere and stay there until Dante got back to me with some useful information.

I was cold, slightly confused, and really scared. Through some strange twist of the Universe, I had been granted a second life. It occurred to me that this was not the kind of second chance I would have imagined, and I doubt one that too many people would have jumped at. What would have become of me if the dark angel's sword had made contact? Dante hadn't had the chance to tell me what the downside to this was, but I could guess. I couldn't go back to Purgatory, and the other places didn't want me. Could a being just cease to exist completely? Could I be erased from the Universe?

It was a long way down, but to my surprise I didn't tire. I pounded onto the steps with gusto, hopping two at a time and expecting to become winded with every drop. I wasn't a total sloth, but I wasn't exactly Tony Horton either. I kept my body in shape, but it was more of a visual in shape than an actual efficiency in power and endurance. When I got to the bottom without even breathing hard, I began to question Dante's assertion that I was alive. He had called it being Awake. He claimed I had power. Maybe this was part of it.

I didn't see any guards, but I assumed that one of America's national treasures wouldn't be completely deserted. I pushed open the door to the stairwell, trying to prevent any squeaks or whines from the hinges. The coast was clear. I slipped away from the stairs and looked around. I assumed the outer door had to be alarmed, so that was a no-go. What I wanted was the men's room.

I circled around the entire area, past the old torch, up the steps and around the exhibits. I had only been the Statue once before, and I never realized that there was no bathroom inside the pedestal. I would have to find somewhere else to hide out.

The somewhere else turned out to be a small janitorial closet out of the way of the main traffic lanes. I was fortunate in that the door was unlocked, hanging open about a quarter of an inch when I spotted it. It was your standard maintenance room - shelves with cleaning agents, buckets, mops, and so on. I turned on the light hanging over the center of the room, found a comfy looking box to sit on in the back corner of the small space, flipped the phone over to face me, and opened the “Landon” app again, pressing on “Guide” in the menu.

* * *

* * *

What is written here has been collected through over five hundred years of exhaustive research, along with a number of interviews conducted by Mr. Ross, and through direct verbal interviews with Miss Charis Stone, the first true diuscrucis to be granted access to the mortal realm. Miss Stone’s first-hand experience is the most vital part of this guide, as it will give you a common insight into what it means to be what you are and to

take on the responsibility that you have. Read these words and take heed in every message contained within. Do not expect that being Awake will be easy. It is a difficult yet rewarding existence.

The assumption has been made that you have already read the rules and are hiding out somewhere safe so that you can read this guide. In order for you to be prepared to survive the coming days, you must learn to control the universe around you. This will not be an easy task, but I believe you will find it most beneficial.

You may be wondering what this means. When you were in Purgatory you had the ability to change your surroundings at your will, although only subconsciously. You hold this same power in the mortal realm, albeit to a lesser degree. How much less, I cannot say. Your ultimate strength rests within yourself. Since you are still wearing clothes, you have your first physical proof of this power.

To control it, you must above all things believe in it. This is not a simple task, as you must let go of every natural law that you have ever learned or experienced. These laws do not apply directly to the Divine, as the Divine originated from the Creator to help guide the world He created. This does not mean you will be able to fly, or walk through walls, or any such nonsense because abuse of these laws can have catastrophic consequences on the fabric of the universe that you are manipulating. The more you push, the more resistance you will encounter. You do not have unlimited resources. You will become fatigued and could lose consciousness if you push too hard, leaving yourself open to your enemies, of which there are many.

Read this first exercise, and then close the Guide and practice it. Once you are able to succeed in producing the desired effect, move on to the next page. Do not give up, no matter how difficult it may seem.

Make It Rain

1. Close your eyes, try to relax

2. Think about rain

3. Open your eyes.

4. Focus on a spot directly in front of you

5. In your mind, command the water vapor to condense in the air, creating rain.

* * *

* * *

I turned off the phone and put it in my pocket. After what I had been through already, how hard could it be to reject the laws of nature? Was there any reason I couldn't make it rain? At the same time, it just felt silly.

I closed my eyes and tried to relax, but even that proved difficult. I didn't feel like I was any different now than I had been before. True, I had just hiked down the Statue of Liberty without a sweat, but that was physical. I opened my eyes and focused on a spot just in front of me. Rain! Nothing happened. Rain! No dice. Dante had known this wasn't going to be easy. Anyway, what else did I have to do while I waited for daybreak?

"Rain," I said out loud. I felt a small touch in my mind as if I was actually using my brain as a muscle to physically push something. Nothing happened. I concentrated on that feeling, tried to duplicate it. Nothing. I took a deep breath and started over, closing my eyes and slowing my breathing. When I opened them, I was face to face with a vampire.

Her face was only inches from mine. Her fangs were bared in the scariest, most malicious smile I had ever seen. She had come out of nowhere and hadn't made the slightest sound. Her skin was a lifeless white, her hair and eyes black. I could feel the animosity pouring off of her. Even if she had been a little girl smiling at me and offering me candy, I would have known her intent.

"Oh crap," I cried as I leaned to the side and started flailing like a fish, desperate to get off the box and away from the thing.

The force of her strike put chips in the wall where my chest had just been. The momentum of my flailing sent me off my seat and onto her, shoving her back and onto the floor. I fell on top of her, and by her expression I could tell she was surprised by the maneuver. I guess she had been expecting someone who actually knew how to fight.

Recovering from her shock, she grabbed my shoulders and literally threw me off of her, sending me slamming against the wall next to the door. I looked at it longingly, but who was I kidding. There was no way I could outrun or outfight this thing. I was done before I had even gotten started.

She hopped to her feet, not even using her hands to help push up. I got a good look at her now. She looked to be between eighteen and twenty-two years old, five and a half feet tall, an athletic build, and a small face with high cheekbones. Her eyes had changed from

all black to a more human looking, and quite striking blue. She was wearing a cropped leather jacket over a pink tank, a short black skirt and medium-heeled black boots that cut off just below the knee, accentuating her pale, well-toned legs.

She stood there and looked at me. If she hadn't been a demon-spawn who was about to kill me, I might have been thinking about asking her on a date. Why wasn't she finishing the job? I was the mouse, and she was the cat. It made sense.

"What are you?" she asked me.

I hadn't expected her to speak. It caught me off guard. "Wh... what?"

"You smell like a seraph," she said, "but you fight like a human."

I didn't know what to say. I figured either way I was about to become a meal, so I went with the truth.

"Just part, actually," I replied. I inched my way towards the door while I spoke. She just stood there. Why should she be worried? I was pretty sure she could close the gap in half a second or less. "Part angel, part demon, part human. I just found out today."

"A crossbreed?" she asked. "You?"

Okay, maybe I wasn't much in a fight, but the way she said it was just insulting. I glanced over and saw I had almost reached the door. As I had thought, she noticed. She was on me in two strides, her long delicate fingers gripping my throat and pulling me to my feet. She put her face right into mine, and then leaned into my neck. I could feel the heat of her breath against my skin, and I prepared to be food.

Instead, she pulled her head back and looked into my eyes. It was the same look Dante had given me, the one that I had felt deep within my soul.

"Indeed," she said. She let go of my throat and backed up a few steps. "How did you get here?"

I was shocked enough by the fact that she hadn't bitten me. Now she was engaging me in conversation? "I was dropped off here," I said. "I haven't been Awake for very long."

She laughed. "That much is obvious. Today is your lucky day crossbreed. I only hunt pures. Sometimes humans when I need the sustenance, but angel blood tides me over longer, and to be honest it's much more tasty." She looked me over like she was trying to pick out a pastry. "I can't be sure if you'd be more like a chocolate bar or a clove of garlic." She smiled, showing off her fangs. She

started to step around me to get out the door.

"Wait a second," I said. That was one of the oddest and most stomach churning things I'd ever heard anyone say, and she scared the heck out of me, but since I had limited sources of information I had to see what I could get from her. "I was told your kind would rip me apart without a second thought."

"Most of my kind would," she replied. She gave me that condescending look again that made me feel like I was less than dirt. "You're no good to feed on, and you're no sport at all; maybe in a few months when you've had time to adjust. My name is Rebecca. Perhaps we'll meet again."

I started to form another question, but before I could get it out she was through the door without a sound. I sat there motionless for a few minutes, trying to absorb all of the signals being rushed to my brain. Vampires were real!

It was a hopeless endeavor, and I stumbled over to the corner just in time to dry heave. Once that was over, I started shivering, the adrenaline withdrawing and leaving me to pick up the pieces. I sat down on the floor. I didn’t care anymore if someone found me here, as long as they were human.

I reached into my pocket to retrieve the phone, and then groaned in dismay. What I pulled out of my pocket didn't resemble a cell phone at all. It was just a mess of wires, circuit boards, and glass. As if things couldn't get any worse. I leaned back against the door so I wouldn't be surprised again, and went to sleep.

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I woke up to someone shoving at the door behind me. Still groggy, I was ready to let whatever it was come right in and eat my soul. I groaned and rolled out of the way, putting my hand on the floor so I could climb to my feet.

"What the hell?" The janitor looked down at me, hands on his hips and a sour expression on his face.

"Sorry," I said. "Drank a little too much yesterday, I must have passed out in here."

He glared at me, and then looked up at the rear of the room. I hadn't noticed, but one of the shelves had been knocked askew during the fight.

"You wait right here," he said. "I'm going to get the guard."

Like I was going to wait right here. I jumped to my feet and went out the door. It was still early, but the island was open for business. There were some tourists wandering around, but more importantly, the alarm was off, and the doors were open. I looked across the area to where the janitor stood with a guard, pointing in my direction. They both started walking over.

I hoped they didn't see me, but I couldn't imagine how they wouldn't. There weren't enough other people here for me to blend in, and I wasn't exactly inconspicuous at six feet tall, brown hair, leather blazer, and blue jeans. I was going to have to either accept getting caught or somehow fight my way out.

I tensed as they approached, still undecided on which play I should make. They were still talking to each other, the janitor motioning like he was describing the damage to the wall. They looked over at me.

"Good morning sir," the guard said. Then they walked right by.

I turned around to watch them. I saw them go into the closet. A second later the guard came out, shouting into his radio and running for the door. I knew I should leave, but I had to know for sure. I walked back over and peeked into the closet. The janitor was standing by the damaged shelves, staring at what I assumed was the chipped wall.

"Looks like someone made a mess," I said to him.

"You can say that again," the janitor replied. "Some drunk asshole busted the door and barfed in that corner over there. Not to mention he knocked over all this crap."

I was curious about something. "Hey buddy," I said. "I just got my hair dyed to cover up some grey. What color does it look like to you?"

He gave me a funny look. "Black," he said. That was just what I wanted to hear.

"Thanks, man," I said. I took one last look back at the closet and beat a path out of there. I was on the ferry within the hour.

I sat all the way in the back, not that it mattered. It was early enough that the majority of people were still headed towards Liberty Island, not away from it. We were pretty well spread out, and I appreciated the opportunity to relax a little bit. Even if I couldn't consciously exert my will on anything, at least my subconscious was helping me out. It seemed like as good a time as any to practice the Rain exercise.

I fixed my focus on a small spot below the seat in front of me and tried to force the rain. The first few efforts were as effective as my attempts in the bathroom stall. Retrain my mind. That was what Dante had said. There is no spoon.

For some reason, my mind wandered back to my encounter with the vampire. Rebecca, she had said her name was. It was strange to

think of a blood-sucking creature of the Devil and put a human name to it. It was stranger still to be thinking about the way she looked in that outfit. According to Dante, this was the face of my enemy. Well, one of them anyway. After all, she lived to feast on my kind. In fact, she couldn't live without feasting on my kind. Or angels, I remembered. She said she preferred to drink the blood of angels. That was really creepy.

I looked out at the water breaking off the back of the ferry. I had smashed the phone, and in doing so lost any hope of getting more information about what exactly I should be doing. Would Dante even be able to find me now? Maybe he couldn't, but I had a feeling Mr. Ross could. I had a feeling Mr. Ross could find anyone, anywhere.

Watching the waves became hypnotic and brought me to a state of mind that I hadn't experienced before. Here I was, sitting on a ferry in the middle of New York Harbor, I had one set of clothes and four grand in my pocket, the bloodlines of angels and demons, both sides itching to put an end to me, and for the first time I felt like I was actually coming to life, or maybe waking up.

I turned my head back to my spot under the chair and willed it to rain. Not with a huge push, an overexertion. I willed it gently, fitting the force of my will to the strength of my desire. I felt the tug in my mind. I felt it grab on like a hook and pull towards me. Water vapor condensed and began to fall in droplets onto my boots. I had told the universe to make it rain, and it had acquiesced. It wouldn't save me from hungry vampires, but it was a start.

By the time I had arrived at Battery Park, I was able to reproduce the raindrops on at least half of my attempts. It was becoming easier to recognize the mental focus that signaled success, and more familiar to feel the pull on my energy. Dante had been right about limits. The few successes I had made had left me feeling a bit drowsy, and super hungry.

As I walked, I kept a watchful eye on all of the people around me. I had no idea who might be playing for one of the other teams, and who thought I was just another average guy going about his business. It would have helped if I could have at least known if they would react, or if they would run off to tell their superiors that they had spotted a diuscrucis wandering around.

Catching the delectable scent of coffee, I diverted myself across the street and into "Gino's Diner" in search of something to stop the

rumbling in my stomach and the growing fatigue caused by bending the universe. The place was pretty empty, but I paid close attention to its inhabitants as I entered. Nobody even bothered to look up at me. I love New York!

Susan led me to a table and handed me a menu. I waved it away. "Two western omelets, a cup of coffee, and a slice of cherry pie if you have it. Whatever pie you do have if not cherry."

She looked down to check the size of my stomach. "You one of those competitive eaters?" she asked me.

"Nah, just hungry," I said. "I feel like I haven't eaten in months."

She didn't say anything, heading off to put in the order. She returned a minute later with the coffee. As she put it down, she looked me in the eyes.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

She looked away. "You just have really pretty eyes," she said. "You need anything else?"

"I'm fine, thanks," I said.

It was weird, but she hadn't been lying, and I didn't get that feeling from her that I'd gotten from Rebecca. I figured I needed to be cautious but not paranoid, or I'd destroy myself without any intervention necessary from the powers that be.

"Actually," I said. "Do you have a newspaper?"

The date was November 19th. I had been in Purgatory for nearly five months. How many had I spent curled into a ball 'suffering my Regrets', as Dante had called it? I thought about my mother for the first time since I had been killed. I wondered if there were any rules about going to see her. Would she recognize me? Did she know our history? Which side of this war would she be on? I knew the answer to that one; she was a devout Catholic. That raised a more important question. If she could see me, would she see me as her son, or as an enemy? Maybe I was being a coward, but I wasn't willing to risk knowing the answer to that. Better to let dead sons stay dead.

Susan dropped off my two omelets and a peach cobbler. I guess it was the closest thing they had to pie. I downed the eggs in record time, polished off the cobbler, and still felt hungry for more. I decided to satiate myself further somewhere else, in order not to arouse any kind of suspicion. I left forty dollars on the table and walked out while Susan was occupied with another table.

As soon as I got outside, I found the nearest street corner and

hailed a cab. I had lost Dante's ‘Guide to Being Awake’, so I needed to start educating myself.

"5th Avenue Apple Store," I said, climbing in.

I would pick up an iPad so I could get online, and then take it to a cheap hotel room somewhere and hole up until I heard from Dante. Combing the dark corners of the Internet was one of my specialties after all, and if there was any mortal information about the workings of the Divine I was sure I would be able to find it there. It might not amount to much compared to what I had lost on the smartphone, but it was better than what I had right now.

"Sure thing pal," he said.

He had a strong accent. Polish maybe? He was definitely European, with a black peach fuzz and a chiseled face. I could see him look me over through the rear-view mirror. I thought I saw his eye twinge as he looked at me but didn't make much of it.

I sat back on the rear bench seat and took a deep breath. I was still hungry, but the headache had gone away, and I was more eager to start learning than I was to continue eating. I was going to start by finding out everything I could about vampires, werewolves, and any other demonic creatures I could branch off to from there. My feeling was that the evil team was bound to be more dangerous, and there was also something in my gut telling me that they were winning this war.

A war I could never win. Everything had happened so fast, I hadn't stopped to think about that simple truth. I was joining the fight for the continued existence of mankind. My goal was to keep things from becoming too evil, or too good. I couldn't snuff one out, or the other would triumph. Would I be spending the rest of eternity like this, or was there a limit to my Awakened life force? The thought was depressing.

When I looked out the window and saw that the cabbie had pulled us off into an abandoned housing project, I realized that I had broken rule number four. I had lost track of my surroundings, and now I was in a place where nobody would hear me scream. I looked up at the driver, who was turning his head back and forth, looking for something himself.

I saw him at the same time the driver did, a lone man in a fine pinstriped suit, sitting on the steps of one of the condemned buildings. When he saw the cab, he stood and reached behind his back, retrieving a sword that even from the distance looked similar

to the one the dark angel in Purgatory had almost halved me with.

"I don't suppose I can talk you out of dropping me here?" I asked.

"Go to Hell," he said. He stopped the cab at the sidewalk in front of the building. The door opened of its own accord. I wasn't about to get out.

"No sense in making this difficult," the man in the suit said. "My associate has already marked you as a demon."

A demon? Dante had said that they would be able to recognize me. That only seemed to be half-true, as both Rebecca and now this guy had seen me only as their direct opposite. I wasn't going to escape, so I slid over and got out of the cab. As soon as I was clear the door slammed shut, and the driver took off.

"That's better," the man said. He looked at me curiously. "You took quite a risk being out during the day. You must have some pretty important information to deliver."

Information? He had taken a look at me and judged me to be no more than a messenger. I did my best to play the part.

"Like I would tell you, asshole," I said.

His eyes narrowed. "Mind your tongue, worm. You can tell me what you know, or I can spit you like a pig."

The eyes. They were brown, simple, human. He wasn't an angel. This had to be what Dante had referred to as the Touched. I decided to change tactics.

"Do you take me for some kind of minor spawn," I shouted. "You have no idea who you are dealing with. The light means nothing to me."

I forced my will, just enough to make my eyes flash red like they do in horror movies. I didn't know if it would work or not, but the tug told me I had been successful. The Touched man's eyes widened, and he held the sword up to defend himself. I could tell he felt overmatched, now all I could do was hope he wouldn't call for backup.

He did the other thing I had hoped he wouldn't. Fight or flight, he decided to fight. He came at me in a rush, committing himself and all his power to a single downward cut. Even as unskilled as I was, the desire to not be cut in half was more than enough for my brain to move my body out of the way. I danced to the side as the blade slammed into the cement, throwing up chips of concrete.

He surprised me by adjusting and getting back into a defensive

posture. The trouble was, I hadn't even considered attacking him back. His maneuver left him a good four feet away, out of sword reach. It was my turn for fight or flight. I turned and ran.

I had six steps on him before he overcame his surprise and started giving chase. I dashed up the stairs and into the abandoned building, catapulting up the inner stairwell at a speed that I didn't know I had. I could hear his shoes landing on the steps below me, getting fainter and fainter as I rose at a pace he couldn't match. I was winning the footrace, but where was I going to go? The building was a bad decision because I was going to run out of up, and I couldn't get back down without passing Samurai Joe. All too soon, I pushed open the door at the top of steps and found myself out on the roof, fifteen stories up.

"God dammit," I cried, seeing that there was nowhere to hide. If the building had ever had an air conditioner, it had already been removed. The rest of the rooftop was solid cement. I spun in a three-sixty. There was another roof about twenty feet away. No way I could jump that. I was considering other options when he emerged from the stairwell in a smoothly executed roll and came to his feet. He had been expecting an ambush. The moment he spotted me, he charged again.

All I could think as I raced towards the edge of the rooftop was that everybody falls the first time. Except here, there was no rubber street to bounce me back up. Here, if I fell… I wasn't actually sure if I would die, but I didn't want to find out. I willed myself to make it across, and I almost shouted with joy in midair as I felt my mind get tugged, and my body soar across the gap. I watched the empty street pass under me, and then get replaced by cement. I hit the ground, hard.

I wasn't prepared for the momentum I had built up. I slammed onto the roof and fell, my body bouncing and rolling along the hard ground. The pain was immediate and intense, registering from a dozen places. My shoulder was broken. It had to be. So was my ankle. I may have gotten away from my attacker, but I had completely messed myself up in the process.

Once I had stopped moving, I started trying to assess the damage. I lifted my head and looked down at my splayed out carcass, saw a lot of tears in my clothes and blood trickling out through them. If I could bleed, I could die. I needed to figure out some way to stand up, to start moving, to get myself to a hospital. I

needed to do it fast because there was nothing preventing the man in the suit from going back down the steps, and coming up here.

I heard a faint rustle, and then the familiar sound of Italian leather shoes walking towards me. So the Touched had some mojo. I wish I had known that before my leap of faith. I looked at him. He was smiling broadly, confident of his triumph.

"Care to talk now, worm?" he asked me.

I coughed up some blood in response.

"Guess not," he said. He stood right over me and raised his sword two-handed, prepared to bury it like Excalibur. I caught a hint of motion behind his right shoulder.

"Wait," I said, raising my hand. He hesitated for just a fraction of a second. It was the longest fraction of the rest of his short life.

She was on him in a blink, yanking the sword from his hands and throwing it across the rooftop, then spinning him around so he could see her face before she buried her teeth in his neck. His body writhed as he was overcome by the assault, a soft groan of pain, or was it pleasure, escaping his lips. As she fed, she looked up at me and winked.

I didn't know if I should be relieved, or more afraid. What was Rebecca doing here? I had a feeling she was following me, but why? There seemed to be more to this than I understood. Watching her drain her victim, my body wracked with pain, I could feel my stomach churning again.

She was finished within a couple of minutes. As the last of the life force left the poor saps body, she dropped the empty shell to the ground and carefully wiped the excess blood from around her mouth with a handkerchief. She was wearing a lot more clothes now; a form hugging long sleeve hooded sweater that dropped over a pair of black tights, knee high boots, and long black gloves. She looked just as good, but much better protected from the sun. She pulled her hood up over her head before she spoke to me.

"Looks like your luck is holding out, worm," she said. I guess she had heard the way the Touched had referred to me.

"You're following me," I said. "Why?"

I was too beat up to be afraid. If she had wanted to take me, she would have done it already. I suppose I should have been disgusted by what I had just seen, and in the back of my mind I was, but she had just saved my life. I could be really forgiving for that.

She waved her arm towards the sun, shining down on the

rooftop with a ferocity that was sure to be unpleasant for her, despite the attire.

"Can we talk somewhere else?" she asked.

"I'm a little indisposed at the moment," I replied.

"Come off it diuscrucis," she said. "You did a great albatross impersonation, but you should be fine by now." She came over and grabbed my arm, pulling me to my feet with a harsh jerk.

I had expected it to hurt. I had expected to see stars. It twinged a little where my ribs had broken, but otherwise I was feeling a lot better. I rotated my ankle, tested my shoulder.

"I'm healed," I said.

"Seriously, I know you said you were new in town but didn't they teach you anything?" She let go of my arm and walked over to where the Touched's sword had landed. She scooped it up in a gloved hand and tossed it to me. "I think you might need this," she said.

I caught the sword, and then held it out so I could take a look at it. It looked like a Japanese katana, with a narrow, slightly curved blade and a guard less hilt. There were symbols running along the entire length of the steel, symbols I couldn't read.

"Do you know what these mean?" I asked.

I was so busy looking at the sword I hadn't noticed that Rebecca was standing by the doorway to the stairs, waiting impatiently to get out of the sun.

"Sorry," I said, and ran over.

We went down a couple of flights, then busted through a locked door into a dilapidated apartment that had been stripped bare of almost everything except a bed, an empty fridge, and a couch. Rebecca hopped up onto the couch and perched on the back, her legs bent and spread like a roosting gargoyle. The stillness of her form in that position was more than a little intimidating. Fighting back the reflex to run again, I sat on the far arm of the couch facing her. She started to speak, and I raised my hand to quiet her. Fear was one thing, but she was right - nobody had taught me anything. I wasn't about to let her dominate the conversation. She was following me. She wanted something from me. I wasn't about to provide it without some info in return.

"Question for a question," I said.

She furrowed her brow. "I don't understand?"

"I ask you a question, you answer it," I said. "Then you can ask

me a question, and I'll answer it. Deal?"

She sat motionless for long enough that I started to think she really had turned to stone. "Very well," she said. "You have a deal. What is your question?"

"Why are you following me?"

She was thoughtful before answering. "I'm curious about you."

"Curious?"

She raised her hand and chided me. "You got your answer. It's my turn." She had a point. I started to feel like I may have suckered myself with this deal. "Where did you come from?"

If she was going to be obtuse, I could play that game too. "I grew up in New Jersey, but I was born in London, England."

There was a hint of frustration in her eyes, but she smiled. The game was afoot. "Why are you curious about me?" I asked.

"I've been nesting in the Statue for over fifty years. No one has ever gotten onto the island at night without me knowing it. Yet, there you were. Out of nowhere." There was something about my appearance that was bothering her. I could tell by the way she spoke about it. "How did you get onto the island?"

I spent a few minutes thinking about the best way to answer the question. While I thought, I looked into her eyes; so blue, almost gentle looking. Captivating. I suddenly had the bright idea to try to look into her the way she had tried to look into me. I felt the tug in my mind, and then my body slammed into the wall behind the couch. She had hit me before I had even seen her move.

"Don't do that again," she said. The blow had knocked the wind out of me. I stumbled to my feet and sat down in my spot on the couch.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Your eyes are beautiful."

It caught her off guard. So much so that she slipped from her crouching position and had to scramble to rebalance herself. I could have pressed the issue, made some other smart remark. I answered her question instead.

"I was dropped off there, on the torch, by a man named Ross." I watched her closely to see how she reacted to the name drop. Her eyebrows raised just a smidge, but it was enough. "What can you tell me about him?"

She got super uncomfortable. "I'm not supposed to speak about those things," she said. "I'm not allowed to say that name."

I pressed her. "We had a deal."

I didn't think vampires could sweat, but she did. She was fighting the war between her fear and our deal.

"Please," she begged. "Ask me something else."

I wanted to push her further, but I didn't have the heart. Maybe if I had been a little more evil, but then I wouldn't have been here.

"What did you just learn about me?" It was a similar question, but it would let her off the hook.

The relief was palpable. "I know where you came from. I know why you are here. There was another like you. Please don't ask me, because I'm not allowed to speak of her either. I had a feeling after we met that was your purpose. I wanted to know for sure. Do YOU know why you are here?"

It was my turn to be caught off guard. I started laughing. Rebecca looked at me with a confused expression.

"I have the thousand mile overview," I said. "But as you saw, I'm completely unprepared for this gig. How do you intend to use this information?"

She pursed her lips, then ran her tongue along her teeth. I waited while she fought with herself over how much to say.

"You may not understand how our kind is organized," she said, "but you will if you live long enough to learn. I'm from the demonic species nosferatu. In relation to humans, we are supreme. In the hierarchy of demons, however; we are somewhere near the bottom."

I understood enough of that to understand that I was screwed. She was calling herself a weakling, and she could kick my ass three ways to Sunday before I even saw it coming.

"Have you considered what will happen to the nosferatu, should this world fall to the chaos of evil?" she asked.

I hadn't. I could put two and two together though. "No more food?"

She nodded. "That's part of the problem, but one that I hope will be overcome. There are members of the community who have been working on a synthetic."

I don't know why, but she tilted her head and sat very still. After ten seconds or so, she started talking again.

"No," she continued. "I believe there is a worse fate that would await us. Once the humans and the seraphim are gone, it will be survival of the fittest, with no other prey to distract the stronger species. My fear is that nosferatu will be hunted to extinction. Unfortunately, I'm unique in that perspective. It's the reason I nest

alone." She looked sad. "To answer your question more succinctly, I want to know all of the players so I can make sure I end up on the right side. Do you have another question?"

It didn't sound very loyal to me, but I had a feeling there was more to it than that. Plus, she had just given me a free question. I had so many, but I wanted to get right to the point. "Do you want to be on my side?"

She laughed at me. I don't know why, but the derision was painful. I guess I was looking for someone to validate my existence because I felt so outmatched and uninformed. I could feel the heat rise into my face, turning me beet red. She stopped laughing, and even looked apologetic.

"I will not be against you," she said. "Which is more than I can say for a great deal of the Divine you will come across. I will not be with you either. Not yet. By the way, do you have a name, or shall I continue calling you 'worm'?"

"Landon," I said, feeling sheepish. It was time to change the subject, to get something with a little more direct substance. "What can you tell me about this sword?"

I held it up with an awkward grip so she could see the symbols running along it.

She didn't need to see them. "It's a standard issue weapon. There is nothing special about the materials, but the sigils are written in the original language of the seraph, and then blessed by a pure angel. You can't kill a demon without such an instrument."

I guess the wooden stake thing was a myth. Now I wished I had watched more Samurai movies when I was a kid. Or at least played a sport, or done something that would have improved my hand-eye coordination. Learning to use a sword was a tall order, especially since I had nobody to teach me. I was waiting for her to ask her next question, when she tilted her head again and floated to her feet.

"We're out of time, Landon," she told me. "There is a demon coming, a messenger. He is no threat to you even in your pitiful state. It’s likely they intercepted the messages being sent between the Touched agents that brought you here, realized you weren't one of theirs and sent him to investigate." She walked over to the window, smashed it with her boot, and leaned out. "I can't be seen with you, it would mean my end. Good luck, worm." She jumped, and by the time I got to the window, she was gone.

If I was going to be receiving visitors, I figured I ought to play it cool. I lay down on the couch with one arm behind my head, leaving the sword in easy reach on the floor next to me. Within thirty seconds, the demon appeared, a small mass of leathery flesh and wings that swooped into the room through the window Rebecca had exited. His beady black eyes caught sight of me, and he landed on the opposite arm of the couch, his taloned feet digging into the padding. He was about three feet tall with a stooped humanoid body that rippled with muscle, and a small elongated snout that shimmered with teeth.

"Master saysss findsss you, and findssss you I did," he said. His head bobbed back and forth as he spoke. "Master sayssss 'why is there another demon in my domain'." His voice rose to an almost comical pitch when he mimicked his master. His snout quivered as he took in the scents. "I wonderssss… smellsss like vampiresssss." He looked as if he was deep in thought. "Now I knowssssss why you are here." He snickered and winked at me.

"Yeah," I said.

I wanted to get him out of here. Even though he was diminutive in stature, he was still the first demon-looking demon I had ever seen. He could be ten percent the killer Rebecca was, and I didn't think I would stand much of a chance. Like the man lying dead on the roof, he seemed to recognize me as a demon, or at least a Turned.

"You scared her off," I told him.

He thought his perceived interruption of our tryst was the funniest thing he had ever heard. His laughter was like scraping Styrofoam.

"I thinkssss you wouldn't have liked the afterssss," he said. "I tellsss the Master why you come, but you needssss to go backssss to your domain. I thinksss you should thanks me for savingsss…" His head turned, and his eyes bugged out. He was looking right at the sword.

"Oh crap," I said, reaching down and grabbing the hilt. I pushed myself up to my knees and swung it awkwardly at the demon. He bounced skyward, avoiding the blow.

"Me doesss notsss understand. Smellsss like demonsss, but has angel'sss stick." He was talking to himself, halfway between the window and me. I got off the couch and approached him, readying the sword for another swing. It was just like hitting a piñata, right?

"Ooh, mastersss rewardsss me well to knowsss about you." He dodged my next two swipes, then retreated out the window. I leaned my head out to watch him fly away. I really needed to learn how to fight.

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5

I beat a hasty retreat from the abandoned building. As I walked, I tried to find an inconspicuous way to hold a four-foot samurai sword. Without some different clothes, it would be impossible. I considered ditching it, but Rebecca thought I would need it, and I tended to agree. Maybe I could even get lucky and hit something with it. With nowhere obvious to hide it, I held it downward and leaned on it as if it were a cane. I focused my will on it, hoping my desire to disguise the weapon as a harmless walking tool would be successful.

Rounding the corner and making my way back into the throng, the lack of surprised faces, looks of fear, or other signs that I was a psychopath wandering the streets with a sword comforted me. Yeah, this was New York after all, but I figured there had to be some kind of limit, if not from the regular denizens, than from any tourists that I happened by.

I decided it would be a bad idea to try a cab again, so I made my way across town on foot, finding a growing appreciation for my new endurance. I made it to the Apple store in good time, stopping

outside the glass cube to take stock of my surroundings before I went anywhere with limited exits.

People going about their daily life engulfed me, and it occurred to me how ignorant we all were. Sure, we had this shallow understanding of the Divine, putting a face to it through religion, telling stories about angels, demons, and the supernatural. We had books like the Bible, or even Dante's classic poetry that attempted to describe that which our living minds seemed to be able to feel, but never truly see. We understood only through the periphery, out of the corners of our eyes, like when we said a prayer before going to sleep at night, or when we just knew there was a monster in the closet or under the bed. To find out it was all real? It was all true? Maybe ignorance WAS bliss?

I descended the stairs into the even more tightly packed masses of humanity, threading my way over to a blue-shirt standing near the tablets.

"Can I help you sir?" he asked as I approached. I pointed at one of the iPads.

"I just need an iPad, color doesn't matter."

The clerk laughed. "A man who knows what he wants, I like it. I'll be right back."

He tucked his own device under his arm and headed off to the storeroom to fill my order. I stole glances wherever and whenever I could, keeping a constant vigil for anything out of the ordinary. If I had been spotted as a demon in an almost abandoned diner, the odds of being outed as non-mortal here seemed exponentially higher.

My sight landed on a young girl who was chatting with her friend. She was maybe fourteen, with short brown hair and a plain face. She was wearing a white down jacket that hung open to reveal a white dress with white leggings underneath, silver moon boots and a knit hat that resembled a panda bear. She was pointing at a phone and gesturing like she wanted it real bad. I wondered if her friend knew she was an angel?

I hadn't known how I would know before I knew. There was no halo or anything like that. In fact, there was no visual sign of anything out of the ordinary. It was more like a radar signal getting sent from my eyes and bouncing back saying 'Divine dead ahead, captain!'.

The sight of her made me anxious. She was just a kid! I turned

my back, but it seemed once contact had been made, line of sight was no longer required. I could FEEL where she was, what she was doing. I realized that facing the other direction wouldn't help me any more than it helped her. She didn't have to see my face. She would get a feel from my soul. That was it, I knew. I was reading her soul, just as she would be able to read mine. The only other question was would she see an angel, a demon, or a diuscrucis?

I spotted the clerk coming back over with the iPad in his hands, and I decided to meet him halfway. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the wad of cash, counted out seven hundred dollars and shoved it into his hand. He gave me a look of suspicious disbelief when I told him to keep the change, but he didn't argue, and he didn't fail to give up the merchandise. I was almost at the steps back to street level when I felt her.

"*Fellow, why do you not announce yourself?* " The voice came from all around me and ran right through me.

I felt immediate warmth and my whole body began to tingle. I flipped my head back to get a look at her. Her body was still manipulating the phone, her mouth still chatting idly with her friend, but her eyes were on me. Rich, golden eyes that held a soft glow like a single flickering candle. It was mesmerizing. I had to force myself to look away.

I didn't know what to say in response, or how to project it silently the way she had. I did the only thing I could think of, turning back and winking at her before beginning my ascent. It probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. Heck, it probably wasn't a smart thing to do at all, but at least I would know how she was seeing me by the way she gave chase.

There was a rush of cool air, and then she was beside me on the steps, walking alongside me. I peeked back to see her friend looking around, trying to figure out where her companion had run off. She headed towards the laptops.

I didn't say anything, and neither did she. We climbed the rest of the steps together in silence, and then I led her off towards Central Park. Even without speaking there seemed to be an understanding between us that transcended normal human communication. When she had spoken to me, she had made a direct line soul-to-soul phone call, and the more I probed the feeling, the more I recognized that she hadn't hung up. We were silent because there was no need for words. Not yet anyway.

I found a lightly populated part of the Park and settled us down under a bare oak tree, resting the sword against the trunk and placing my package next to it. She sank to the ground as if on a pillow of air, perching cross-legged on the grass. I sat opposite her in the same position.

"*I do not recognize you fellow,* " she said.

Her lips didn't move, but her eyes were incredibly expressive. There was curiosity there, friendliness, and sadness. I knew she had taken me for an angel. I was pretty sure the sword had at least a little bit to do with that.

"My name is Josette," she said aloud. Her voice was small and raspy. "Are you recent to our family?"

I didn't know what that meant, but I assumed she meant becoming an angel. If I said yes, I would need an excuse for being here without her knowledge. It felt safer to tell a bold lie.

"Not to the family," I said. "I've only recently returned from a pilgrimage in the Holy Land. My name is Paul." That had to be a safe angel name.

Her eyes widened, and she threw her arms around me. "Paul. Welcome! You have been to the Holy Land?" she asked. "There has been little news since Astrel was killed."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I could lie to an angel and get away with it. "We're losing," I said.

I hadn't thought about it before, but as I said it I knew that it was true. Whatever mojo came from my crossbred lineage, it was clear in that regard. The balance was tipping heavily towards evil.

"The dark gains reach every day," she agreed. "Since we lost John Paul, it has been difficult to keep an even footing. Even here, Reyzl has grown powerful beyond my ability to contain him."

Reyzl. It had to be the name of the demon that the messenger had flown off to squeal to. "I had a run-in with one of his messengers," I told her. "He escaped and intended to tell Reyzl about my presence here."

Her eyes held deep concern for my welfare. I was starting to feel bad for lying to her, and also beginning to wonder if I could do what Dante had asked. It wasn't much of an issue right now, but who knew what the future would hold. Would I be expected to kill this beautiful creature one day? If so, would I be able to do it?

"I do not mean to intrude, but what business brings you here?" she asked.

She reached forward and took my hands in her own. They were small, but so soft and warm. Her whole being exuded peacefulness. I felt like I could tell her anything. I could tell her the truth, and it would be okay.

"To be honest, I'm not sure," I said. "I've only arrived very recently, but I had a run-in with a vampire, and lost my phone."

My mind was beginning to feel as if it were mired in a pit of mud. Clarity was escaping me, replaced with this overwhelming need to tell her everything. All I could think about was the warmth of her hands, the softness of her voice, her shining golden eyes, and the connection between our souls.

"I used to be a computer hacker," I said. "I went to prison for credit card fraud."

It had been so easy to manipulate people. So easy to get the information I needed to get into databases, e-mail accounts, you name it. So tempting. It was a victimless crime, I had told myself. The credit companies had plenty of cash. They wouldn't miss a little bit here and there. I had gotten too bold, a friend had blabbed, and it all crumbled around me.

Two years in a low-security facility, another year of probation, and banned from owning or using a computer for three more. I still didn't always feel remorseful for what I had done. I was more sorry I hadn't been more careful and had gotten caught.

It had all started pouring out in a torrent, and I was drowning in the truth. I could tell by the way her golden eyes flared that she knew what I was. I could feel the warmth of her hands turn cold, feel the peacefulness turn to violence and anger. It was only then that I realized she had used her power on me, so subtly that I hadn't even known it. She must have suspected me from the beginning. I yanked my hands away and got to my feet. She rose, her sword appearing in her hand in a flow of swirling mist.

"Diuscrucis," she cried. "You seek to deceive me!"

I started to reach toward my sword but decided against it. "Wait," I said, holding up my hands. "I don't want to fight you."

She had taken an aggressive posture, with her sword cocked and ready for the battle that I refused to start.

"I just want to talk," I said.

Seeing that I wasn't going to fight her, she let the sword dissipate back to wherever it had come from.

"*Speak* ," she said, her voice powerful in my mind. She was

showing me her strength, sending me a warning.

"The balance is tipping," I said. "The end of days are coming if it isn't restored. We should be fighting together, not fighting each other. You know, allies?"

Her golden eyes narrowed. "Allies? Seraphim Law states that I should strike you down where you stand."

This wasn't going well. "What benefit would that be to you? You're losing Josette. I think you need all the help you can get."

I started inching away, closer to the sword. We both knew it wouldn't harm her, but at least I could make some kind of feeble attempt to defend myself if she decided to follow her laws. She stood motionless, undecided.

"I can help you defeat Reyzl," I said, trying to convince her of my value, even though I knew I had none. "If he's grown beyond your control, it's only a matter of time before he comes for you."

Our souls were still connected, and I felt her demeanor shift again. It seemed even angels had a sense of self-preservation.

"Very well," she said. Her eyes were cautious. "There can be no alliance, our Laws forbid it, but I will not destroy you today. In return, you will seek out Reyzl and either destroy him or weaken him so that I can finish your work. I do not care if you live or die completing this task, but know that I will seek you out again one week hence to see you to your end if you do not hold up this bargain. I will not come alone."

I didn't need to ask what the other option was. I had only bought myself a week, but a week was better than nothing.

"We have a deal," I said.

The feeling of heaviness in my gut was immediate. It was if a chain had been clamped down onto my soul, an awareness of the power of the contract I had just verbally signed. Josette hung up the connection, and the sudden sense of loss nearly overwhelmed me. I had been tapped into some of her power through the bond and had drunk from it like an alcoholic. I could feel a small piece of it within me.

“What is that?” I asked.

"So I can find you again," she said. "Do not think to double-cross me, Landon. You will speed us closer to these end of days if you do." She had said my real name. What else did she know? Why didn't Dante put 'never touch an angel' into his short list of rules?

"I'll see you in a week then," I said, trying to sound a lot more

confident than I felt.

With the connection broken, Josette nodded, then turned back in the direction of the Apple store, most likely to return to her friend. I was bending down to grab my iPad when a massive wave of heat crashed into my senses. My mind didn't have time to process it, but my body reacted.

I dove to the left and rolled to my feet, somehow managing to escape the path of a black, jagged edged blade that buried itself deep in the trunk of the tree we had been sitting under. There was a growl of frustration, then the sound of pounding feet running toward me. I looked up just in time to see the demon make his leap at me, his long sinewy frame carrying him an impossible distance at an impossible speed. I moved faster than I could think, shifting my weight and dropping to the ground just underneath its outstretched limbs, escaping being raked by eight-inch claws.

The beast landed and turned, small black eyes looking right at me, a snout full of razor teeth bared. It had a humanoid frame with grotesquely long limbs that ended in those sharp claws, leathery skin, and bones that protruded at awkward angles from various points on its body.

"Reyzl sends his greetings, newcomer." Its voice was gravel, and its words dripped with disgust.

I got to my feet and reached over to where the sword was leaning against the tree. My instinct seemed to be doing a good job of keeping me from being destroyed. As long as I didn't think too much maybe I could get lucky.

I had forgotten about Josette. The demon didn't seem to have noticed her either until we both saw a white blur darting in at us. It raised its paw just in time to deflect her first strike, causing a shower of energy to reverberate against the air around us. She pressed the attack, her sword a blur of stabs and swipes that was matched by the demon's blocks.

Their attention diverted, I took a more defensive position behind the tree and peered out from the side to watch the battle mature. I looked around and saw the area was deserted of people, as if something in their minds had told them to stay away from this part of the park. Was this how the Divine war raged on with humans none the wiser?

The waves of energy from the clashing enemies filled my senses. Josette was a whirlwind, her down jacket flowing out behind her as

she spun and twirled, the sword an extension of her arm that danced and pricked at the demon. It roared in pain and anger, lashing back but finding only empty air. She continued to press the attack, forcing the demon to retreat backward.

A few more quick jabs and she was past those massive claws, her body slipping inside the demon's reach, her sword being pushed up into its chest. She yanked the weapon free and leaped backward a good ten feet, leaving the demon on its knees, doubled over as it's body expelled a viscous mess of thick black blood.

I stepped out from behind the tree and started moving towards them, wanting to get a closer look. Josette turned to glance at me for just an instant, and then resumed her vigil of the demon's demise.

Something happened then. Something Josette clearly hadn't expected. The demon's wound closed over, and with a razor sharp grin it pounced forward, slamming her with its hand and sending her torn body thirty feet through the air. She bounced against the ground a couple of times and came to rest against a distant tree. The demon turned to face me.

"What are you staring at seraph?" it asked. "Have you never seen a Great Were before?"

Never seen, never heard. I only had a second to wonder if by were it meant werewolf, when it leaped at me for a second time with a speed that I couldn't match. There was an explosion of pain that blossomed throughout my entire body when the sharp claws dug into my flesh and rended it from the bone, ripping into me like no more than a piece of meat. My vision blurred and doubled as the Were lifted me to eye level.

"Pathetic," he said, throwing me across the lawn.

Another round of agony greeted me as I hit the dirt and slid face down. I lifted my head just enough to see the demon. I watched it transform in the space of one step to the next, shrinking in mass and gaining hair, skin, and clothing. It became a man with long raven hair in skinny jeans and a worn t-shirt, like a werewolf for sure. He exchanged his claws for a jagged black dagger that he pulled from the back of his pants. He was walking towards Josette, who I could see was fighting to rise to her feet.

As he approached her, he reached under his shirt and produced a necklace with a red stone. He held it up to her, showing it off. "Have you ever seen one of these seraph?" he asked. "It removes the

poison from your blows. I don't suppose you have one of your own, to do the same to mine? No? A pity."

I could feel the pain in my body subsiding as it worked to heal itself. I looked down and watched in fascination as new skin grew to replace the shredded mess above it, new muscle regenerating beneath. Fascination gave way to anger. I'd had enough of this punching bag routine.

The Were was almost on top of Josette, his posture oozing confidence and superiority. He was oblivious to me, and to my change in health. I couldn't take him out head on, but there was more than one way to skin a big ugly monster cat.

I got to my feet and looked for my sword, finding it a good fifty feet away. No good. I looked back at Josette and saw her weapon was on the ground next to her. Not great, but better. I took off towards the demon at a run, willing myself to be faster than I had ever been. I was rewarded with a burst of speed that left the ground no more than a blur beneath my feet. In less than a second, I was leaping towards the Were, reaching out to will the angel's sword to my hand.

It all happened in the space of an instant. I should have been destroyed because the sword didn't come at my call. I found myself airborne, rapidly approaching the back of the demon, and weaponless. There was no time for an alternate approach. I had sunk my efforts into this one desperate move. I could see the demon's head begin to turn towards me. I could see Josette's golden eyes flare as she sensed my approach.

The impossible happened then. The seraph took hold of her sword and threw it towards me with perfect precision, my hand caught it and my arm drew back. The Were completed his surprised turn, and I sank the weapon into his heart as I slammed into him. We both tumbled to the ground, the force of the impact throwing me away from him again. I rolled to my feet and watched him gather himself, rise to his feet, and pull out the sword a second time. He looked at me with a shocked yet satisfied smirk on his face until he saw that I had his necklace in my hand.

"Who are you?" he growled as he went back to his knees. "You should be dead."

I got up and approached him. Whatever magic was in the angel's sword, it was doing its thing. The demon was disintegrating from the point of the wound outward. There was a smell of frankincense,

and smoke began wafting from the hole in his chest. Where a moment ago there had been a gloating beast in man's clothing, there was now just a dying lamb.

"Pathetic," I said, turning my back on him, pocketing the necklace, and walking over to Josette. I didn't watch the demon finish his final death. I didn't need to.

Or maybe I did. I wanted to check on Josette, to see if I could help her. After all, despite her disdain for me, she had just helped me. Whether or not it was to aid her as well, that didn't matter right now.

I had almost reached her when I felt a coldness at my back. Before I could turn around, a black cloud encircled me, whipping around like a mini-tornado, spinning tightly in a maelstrom of energy. It smelled like sulfur, and in it I felt power. It overwhelmed me, and I fell to my knees unable to breathe. I opened my mouth to gulp in air, and the black cloud forced its way inside. I choked on it, my mouth filling with the acrid taste of the stuff pouring into me. As it completed its forced entry, I leaned over and vomited.

"Diuscrucis." Josette stumbled over to stand next to me. Her clothing was hanging in shreds, and her bloody face had a deep gash across the cheek.

"What just happened?" I asked. My stomach told me it was getting ready for round two. At the same time, I felt different in a way that permeated much more deeply into my being.

"The demon tried to take your soul," she said, her breathing labored. "He didn’t know what you were, and has trapped himself. He can give you power, but not without cost."

I wanted to ask her what she meant, but her golden eyes dimmed, and she fell back to the ground. Not gone, but seriously injured. I couldn't leave her here. I bent down and lifted her in my arms, surprised by how light she felt. I put her over my shoulder, and then retrieved her sword and my iPad. After a small bout of indecision, I grabbed one of the demon's daggers too. There was a part of me that was sure I was making a mistake by taking Josette with me. I ignored it and made my way out of the park, willing the world around me to see a man carrying a baby on one shoulder, a folded up stroller over the other. It was a little too domesticated for me, but it would have to do.

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6

The punk-slash-emo guy running the front desk at the Belmont Hotel didn't even give me a second look when I lumbered in holding two large duffels. I was getting more accomplished with altering my outward appearance, and had dressed down for the occasion. My hair was long and greased, I had three days growth on my chin, and my clothes were worn and dirty. On the walk over, I had also discovered how to repair my inward appearance, fixing the rips and tears in my clothing so I could see and sense myself with some semblance of physical dignity.

"How much for your best room?" I asked, approaching the desk.

Punkmo shrugged. "It's twenty-five per night, all the rooms are priced the same." He reached under the desk and produced a padlock with a key. "Just find an empty room and lock the inside. When you leave, lock the outside."

The modern world sure made being limited to cash a frustrating proposition, especially when trying to find a place to hunker down for a while. Most upscale hotels required holding a credit card on file, which meant bypassing anything a person might want to spend

any amount of time in, and instead making do with something that someone could spend time in if they had to. I had to. I turned my back on him so I could count through my stash without him being able to see how much I was carrying. I handed him three hundreds.

"Good for twelve days, right?" I asked.

He furrowed his brow and looked at me. The math was a little too much for him. "Sure man."

He snatched the cash a little too eagerly and pushed the lock forward. I put down the sword to pick up the lock and stuck it into my jacket pocket.

The Belmont. The name made me laugh out loud. The place was about half of a step above the condemned projects where I had watched Rebecca drain a good guy. I was sure it had been a fine place a hundred years ago or so, but it seemed like it hadn't been renovated since, well, ever. The interior was old, drab, and dirty, with peeling faded wallpaper and either missing or busted furniture. The rooms weren't much better, decorated with ripped sofas, old mattresses stained yellow from all kinds of bodily fluids, ancient fridges of which maybe fifty percent were functional, and a varying but always present amount of mold. Every room had roaches. Only two of the rooms I passed had people. The place was more for quickies with hookers and drug exchanges than living in, but I didn't have too many housing options.

I settled into 7G, a room on the top floor in the southeast corner. It gave me a decent view of the streets below through small grimy windows that would hide my own visage from anyone looking in, and a mattress that had a better than fifty percent chance of not housing an STD.

I gently slid Josette off of my shoulder, placing her on top of the bed. She was still unconscious, but her breathing was steady. Her wounds continued to ooze blood, refusing to close over, and the gash on her cheek had some nasty black spider veins reaching out across her face. I had no way to judge the effect of a demonic wound on an angel, but going by what had happened to the Were when I stabbed him, she was suffering from damage that wouldn't heal on its own. When I put my hand to her forehead, I could feel that she was burning up, maybe literally.

"Josette," I whispered.

She didn't respond. That raised the question - how do you heal an angel who was wounded in a fight against a demon? Answer -

holy water. Maybe it wouldn't work, but it seemed like the best option and I didn't have much to lose. I wasn't going to let her die, not like this. She had spared my life, and I was going to return the favor. Maybe she'd even be grateful. If she wouldn't let me out of our deal, the act of kindness might be enough to convince her to at least offer some measure of help in completing the task without having my soul destroyed. Not an alliance, but maybe information.

"I'll be back," I said to her prone form as I ducked out of the room, put the padlock on the door, and headed out to find a church.

The sun had vanished behind dark, heavy clouds, and it started pouring while I walked. I needed a vessel for the holy water, so I dropped in on a liquor store and bought the cheapest bottle of wine they had, which I dumped on the pavement outside. I got into a small argument with a passing vagrant about wasting heat, and then resumed my hunt for a house of God. When I pushed through the twin doors of Our Blessed Lady Mary RC Church, I was soaked to the bone, the water dripping off of me creating a slippery mess on the cold marble floors.

"That rain's right devilish."

I had been hoping to avoid running into a priest, but he was already mopping the floor when I walked in. He was an older man with short reddish-white hair, a fair complexion, and a kind smile. He wore the wisdom of age on his face and the creases around his eyes. Irish, if his accent was any indication.

"It sure is Father," I said, not making eye contact. "I'm sorry for the mess."

There was an expanding pool of rainwater gathering at my feet. He looked down at it and chuckled.

"Don't ye worry yerself child," he said. "Ye look like ye could stand bein' outta the rain."

I had disguised the empty wine bottle as an umbrella. He looked at it, then looked at me, then looked back at the umbrella.

"Might've helped ye a wee bit if ye had used that thing," he said, a strange look on his face. "Then again, an empty wine bottle ain't much help in a rainstorm, is it?"

He could see right through my glamour. Were all priests Touched? There was no point being ambiguous.

"I need your help," I told him. "Holy water."

"What does someone the likes of you need with holy water?" he asked. "More like to poison you than heal you crossbreed."

I had to know. "How did you know? Are you Touched?"

He laughed then, an old, wise, hardened laugh. "I didn't just come out of the potato field laddie," he said. "And I don't need the blessin' of a pure angel to make my eyes work proper. Ye may fool some of 'em, but I'm a humble servant of the Lord, and I know me own. Besides laddie, what darn fool carries an umbrella, but isn't using it to keep himself dry?"

Dante was proving to be a little unreliable when it came to who could and couldn't sense my true nature. Here was a self-proclaimed plain ordinary mortal, and he saw right through the glamour, past the blood and lineage, straight through to the truth.

"It's not for me Father," I said. "I have a friend who was injured by a demon, a Great Were." I didn't know how much he knew, but I figured if he were familiar with angels and crossbreeds, he would know demons too.

The priest rubbed his hand along his chin. "A Great Were eh? That's a nasty beastie to get into a scuffle with. How many seraph were involved?"

"Just one," I told him. "You know about weres?"

"Aye, of course I do laddie," he said. "Always a treat to watch a werewolf movie, and laugh at how weak they portray those foul creatures ta be. A Great Were, now that's a hundred times nastier than your nastiest werewolf. Mean and smart, they are. Did you say one?"

I shrugged. "Well, one and a half I guess."

"Aye, a half," he said, his tone harsh. "The seraph was injured, and ye're here for holy water to heal it?"

"Is it so hard to believe father, that I would try to heal an injured angel?"

My voice was rising, and he put his finger to his lips to shush me, motioning with his eyes to the few scattered people kneeling behind the church pews.

"Actually, boy-o, it is," he said.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me off to the left, through a door and into his private office. He closed the door behind us, then let go of my arm and reinstated his direct glare. "Look here laddie, it takes at least three seraph to take down a Great Were on a good day. Ye're saying ye helped one seraph do it, and not only did ye win, but the angel survived?"

I hadn't known what we were fighting, and now I realized that

was probably a good thing. If I had thought about how powerful it really was, I probably would never have made my kamikaze move against it.

“That’s right,” I said. “Although, I can’t be too sure about the part where she survives unless you decide to help me. I would think you would be eager to see one of yours back to good health.”

“It’s not a matter of what I want boy-o, it’s a matter of trust. Do ye even understand what ye are? Ye don't have a side but fer yerself. Ye can cross back and forth on a whim. Ye can employ all manner of trickery and deceit to meet yer aims, and only the most astute of the Divine will even have an idea they’re bein’ double-crossed. Ye can cause all sorts of mayhem, discord, destruction for no other reason than because it suits ye, all while smellin’ like roses and gettin’ all the blessins’ of Heaven."

His face was turning beet red, and his anger was growing beyond reason. Without thinking, my hand shot forward and wrapped around his neck. His eyes widened in surprise, and he stopped talking.

"Listen to me Father," I said then, my own anger stewing. "My aim is only to heal the angel. She saved my life, and I intend to return the favor. Don't make it at the expense of your own."

I let go of him then, drawing back in a shock of my own at the violent outburst. I had never been like this before. A wave of guilt washed over me.

"I'm sorry Father," I said, lowering my head. "I'm pretty new at this gig, but the one thing I know is that I'm not your enemy." I turned to leave.

"Wait," he said, rubbing his neck with his hand. I looked back at him, feeling doubly foolish for almost choking him to death. "Why do ye think the seraph survived?"

I hadn't expected the question, especially after what I had just done. "Excuse me, father?"

"A Great Were can kill an angel with one blow,” he said. “Why didn't he?"

I didn't know enough about weres of any kind to know the injury was uncommon. I told him about the fight. I gave him all the details. When I was done, he took the wine bottle and left the room. When he returned, he blessed it himself. He didn't speak again until he handed it back.

"He was gloatin’," he told me then. "He let the angel run him

through so he could do it, and made straight sure not to kill her with his first cut. He didn't know what ye were. He didn't expect ye to recover. Ye got lucky killin' him." He walked over and held out the bottle. "I don't like ye laddie, and I don't like yer kind or whom ya be workin' fer, but if helping ye helps a seraph, I'll do it this once. Darker days are comin' when a demon lets himself be stabbed, and Lord knows we need all the help we can get. Now go, and don't ever show yer face in my church again."

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7

Josette was still unconscious when I returned to my room at the Belmont. The bedding under her was red with her blood, still running out through the wounds on her face and chest. I didn't know how much blood an angel could lose, but judging by the coolness of her forehead and the shallowness of her breathing, it couldn't be much more.

As I stripped off her shredded clothes so I could treat the wounds, I had to remind myself that even though she appeared to be in a child's body, Josette was not a child. Even so, it felt so wrong to be undressing her this way, but I had no other choice. Her flesh underneath was pale grey, and the same lines of black veins that I had seen on her face were also spreading from the cuts on her body.

The linens were already ruined, so I used the sword to cut out strips of cloth, dipped them in the holy water, and placed them over the gashes. The affected areas hissed and steamed as I did so, causing Josette to let out a soft moan and the familiar scent of frankincense to fill the room. Almost immediately, some of the

color began returning to her skin, and I could see the black lines receding from under the edges of the cloths. I went over to one of the empty hotel rooms to get a sheet to lay over her, and then grabbed the box for the iPad and sat down at the side of the bed.

I slid the device out of the box and turned it on, then kept my eyes on Josette while it booted up. The cut on her face was super deep and had taken two cloths dipped in the holy water before it had stopped bleeding. I wasn't sure if it would ever heal completely. Otherwise, she was looking a lot better already, her face flushing as the blood returned to it.

Wi-Fi was pretty ubiquitous in Manhattan, and I didn't have any trouble finding an open connection I could leech off of. I started with the basics. I typed 'how to kill a demon' into Google and hit enter. It didn't surprise me that all of the results were filled with media-fed, superstition based thoughts on destroying evil beings, without a hint of truth to any of them. Holy water, wooden stakes, garlic, blah, blah, blah. I hadn't thought I would come up with anything there. I needed better sources.

At the height of my illicit dealings in credit card numbers, I had belonged to a message board called "SamChan," so named after Samuel L. Jackson, motherf**cker. If anyone knew anything real about the war between angels and demons, I could probably get a line to them there. The channel was filled with all types of hackers, crackers, conspiracy theorists, and other assorted societal chafe that would buy and sell any data they could get their hands on. I wasn't too sure I should try to use my old account, but getting access wasn't as simple as entering an e-mail address and password. If anyone noticed they'd probably think my credentials had been compromised, which would result in a good laugh for all involved. That was assuming my account was still active. It was.

I was eyeball deep in a thread posted by a guy who was looking to sell or trade a video he claimed was of a real vampire when Josette woke up. I wasn't looking at her at the time, but I could just feel her presence change. It reminded me of a butterfly bursting from a cocoon - one moment there was this ugly emptiness, the next a fullness of spirit and beauty that caught me off guard. When I turned my head to check on her, her golden eyes were open and alight with an internal sparkle, and she was smiling at me.

"Thank you," she said. I hadn't known what to expect, but gratefulness was a good start.

"I should be thanking you," I told her. "If you hadn't tossed me your sword, we'd both be dead right now. How do you feel?"

She took a moment, shifting in the bed a little bit. "The poison has been purged. The wounds are healing, but I still feel a little weak. Why did you save me?"

"Like I said, you saved my life."

She shook her head. "I saved my life, diuscrucis. You may have benefitted from that, but it was not an act of benevolence."

No, I suppose it wasn't. Had I really thought she was doing me a favor?

"Whether it was intentional or not, you did. Look, whatever you think of me, I'm not a bad guy. I'm just trying to make sure that mankind is allowed to govern its own future. Letting you die would have been a negative on the scorecard, and besides I don't think you deserved to go like that."

Her eyes turned thoughtful, the sparkle shifting inwards.

"You must understand, Landon," she said. "This isn't about whether or not you are a nice guy. This war has been going on for thousands of years, and now after spending centuries gaining ground we are beginning to lose, and badly. There was another who came here making the same claims as you. She earned our trust and respect even as our enemy. She fought against us, and she fought with us, but we believed she would never seek to deceive. We were wrong."

"You mean Charis?" I asked.

The name kept coming up. Was she the reason my inception here felt like such a disaster?

Josette nodded. "She used our trust to trick us, then gave us up to Reyzl. She knew the outcome would shift the tide of the war, would go against everything she claimed to be fighting for. She said we didn't understand the bigger picture. We lost a dozen angels and countless mortal allies in the nights that followed."

As she spoke, tears began rolling down her face. She winced in pain as one slid under the bandage and touched the wound there.

"What happened to her?" I asked. Dante had said she was gone. He hadn't bothered to mention that she was a traitor. Why not?

"She disappeared," Josette said. "We have heard that Reyzl double-crossed her, and stabbed her in the back while she was enjoying the fruits of her betrayal."

I was being racially profiled, except as far as I knew there were

only two of us. It figured this Charis had to go and ruin it for me.

“We may have similar bloodlines, but we’re not the same person,” I said.

"It is unjust I agree,” she replied, “but you must consider our perspective. Unlike demons, it is very difficult to replace a lost seraph. Heaven is a wondrous place, and few enough are willing to give it up to fight a war that has no definitive end. To lose so many in such a short time was an event that none of us can bear to see repeated. So we do not trust those who are not of our kind, and we forbid alliances because the gain of an ally cannot compare to the potential devastation that could follow."

She put her hand on the sheet to hold it in place and sat up. When she dropped the sheet, she was wearing a white leather raincoat over a plain white blouse. A large diamond cross hung from her neck. She reached up with small, delicate fingers and pulled the bandage from her face. As I had feared, the wound had left a thin black scar along her snow-white cheek. She ran her finger over it, her eyes dimming in sadness.

"I should have known it was a trick," she said. "I have to go. You have my gratitude for saving my life."

She moved to head for the door, but without thinking, I stopped her. I put my hand to her face, surprised by how small and soft it was in my hand. She didn't resist my touch.

"We both should have died today," I said, looking her in the eyes. "We got lucky. I won't keep getting lucky forever."

Her lips were trembling as she waited to hear me out, and to see what I intended to do with her. Her wounds might have been healed but I could tell she was still weak.

"If you can’t or won’t be my ally because of your laws, I can accept that,” I said. “But please don't leave without giving me the one thing that can help us both stop this war from being won by the demons."

"Wh...What is that?" she asked. Her voice was soft, scared.

I didn't know if it would work, but I had to try. I focused my will on my hand the way I had focused on the air to make it rain. I tried to feel the damage to her face, to pick out every molecule of imperfection that was marring the otherwise flawless surface. I ordered the damaged cells to disconnect, pulling the remaining demonic filth into my own body, and removing it from hers. She shook as I did it, her eyes glowing brightly in surprise.

"Knowledge," I said, pulling my hand away.

With the dirty tissue cleaned she healed without obstruction, and in moments the scar was gone.

She stared at me then for what seemed like ages. Her eyes were locked on mine, and she was still as a statue. Her breathing evened out and her face flushed red. I could feel the tension between us while I waited for her to decide what to do.

"Very well diuscrucis," she said. "You saved my life, so I will try to help you. Know that we are not allies, and never shall be. I am simply repaying my debt, which is well within the tenets of our laws."

She smiled then, a big, wild smile that told me she had made up her mind, that she was throwing her caution to the wind, and that she still didn't trust that I wouldn't crush her with it. It was the kind of smile that comes from the strength of willful disobedience and the underlying fear of the consequences.

"Now, grab your sword and follow me to the roof," she said. "I shall call this class Demon Fighting One-o-one."

I went over to where my sword was resting by the window. I noticed it was dark outside. "Josette," I said, remembering Dante's rules.

She bounced over to where I was standing. Her whole demeanor had changed, and she looked a lot more like a fourteen-year-old girl to me. She peered out the window.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's dark out," I told her.

"Yes," she agreed. "The sun has in fact set." She stepped back and looked at me, her brow furrowing inward. "You destroyed a Great Were, and you are fearful of the dark?"

I could feel the heat of my flush rise up through my cheeks. "Dan..."

"Do not," she cried out, interrupting me. When she was sure I was done talking, she lowered her voice. "Do not say his name." Serious Josette had returned.

"Why not?" I asked her.

"He is the only person ever to volunteer to leave Heaven for the Middle realm," she explained. "His name is to be forgotten and unwrought for all time, as is that of his servant. That is our law. It is the only law that both Heaven and Hell have ever agreed to. If you absolutely must make reference, he is known as the Outcast."

Wow, that was a lot of hate. I could understand why Heaven may have been cross with him, but what had he done in Hell to cause such disdain?

"How old are you anyway?" I asked Josette, trying to turn the conversation away from things she wasn't allowed to mention.

The seriousness faded, and the adolescent exuberance sprang back into view. "That is your non-sequitor, Landon?"

The way she giggled changed her from plain to almost pretty. My face flushed again. Everything I said was making me feel dumber and dumber.

"I know you aren't fourteen." It was all I could think of to say.

She laughed louder. "You are concerned about this physical manifestation?"

"I'm more concerned about having undressed your physical manifestation," I said. "I'm sorry for that, by the way. I didn't have any other choice."

It was her turn to be embarrassed. It seemed she hadn't realized the efforts I had to go to in order to heal her.

"Do not fear Landon, I have been a member of the Order of Seraph for over seven hundred years. I did die as a young lady, and have chosen to remain that way because I find it comfortable and familiar. The same goes for the underlying personality, although I do find it increasingly difficult at times to hold onto the joy and innocence of youth."

Seven hundred years? So much she had seen and done; centuries of war and fighting and killing. Did she regret her decision to become an angel? I didn't ask, for fear of spoiling her mood before she had taught me anything.

"Well then grandma," I said. "Let's hit the roof."

The rain had stopped some time earlier, but the roof was still slick from the downpour, and the dropping temperature was already turning it into a sheet of black ice. My footing was unsteady, and I was shivering from the cold as we walked out towards the center of the rooftop. Josette didn't seem to notice it at all, her knee high white boots moving her effortlessly across the surface despite their four-inch heels. When we reached the center, she materialized her own sword and held it up in front of me. She noticed how much I was shaking and cocked her head to the side.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"It's freezing out here," I told her, crossing my arms and rubbing

my shoulders. I guess I could have changed my shirt into a parka, but I had never seen any movies where the samurai wore heavy, puffy coats.

Josette laughed at me again. “Landon, you are Awake. Divine. You do not need to feel cold unless you choose to.“

“You make it sound so simple,” I said through chattering teeth.

“Your human mind believes you should be cold, and so you are,” she said. “Don’t listen to it. That is lesson number one.”

Don’t listen to it. Right. Don’t listen to it. I tried to distract myself from the cold. I imagined being on a beach in Florida, feeling the warm sun on my face. For a moment, I almost thought I might not feel cold. No, I did. It was freezing.

“Can’t do it,” I said.

The sword vanished again, and Josette walked over to where I was standing. She took my face in her hands and pulled me down so I was at eye level with her.

“You are standing on a rooftop, with your face three inches from an angel,” she said. “In the last six hours you killed a powerful demon, and swallowed its soul. You also healed from wounds that would kill any mortal. Now, tell me why you are cold.”

While she spoke, her golden eyes sparkled as though they contained all of time and space. She was using logic on me, and I was falling for it. I took a deep breath and nodded. She broke her gaze and stepped back.

“Well?” she asked.

I bent down and put my hand on the icy cement. I could feel the sensation of the freezing surface in my fingers, but it didn’t make me feel cold. Cold was a mortal sensation, and I was no longer mortal.

“I’m ready now,” I said, standing back up.

Josette smiled and her sword reappeared in her hand.

"How do you do that?" I asked her. It would make moving around a lot easier to not have to manage the four-foot long blade.

"Sorry Landon," she replied. "You have your own abilities, but that isn't one of them."

"Why not?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes, making me feel dumb again.

"Excuse me miss seven-hundred-year-old-seraph, “ I said, “but I've never been to the School for the Divine."

She giggled again and dismissed her weapon.

"Okay, I guess I need to give you at least a tiny bit of background before I start beating your brains in," she said, kneeling down and motioning for me to join her. "Most people talk about Heaven and Hell as if one is up there in the sky, and the other is somewhere near the core of the Earth."

She scratched out a rough globe with a cloud above it for Heaven and a flame below it for Hell. I tried to be nonchalant about the fact that she was using her fingernail to make the scratches in the blacktop. She put her hands outside of the pictogram and squished them inward, so that the three scratches all sat on top of each other. How did she do that?

"In reality, we're all on the same level, but we're not in the same… dimension, I guess," she said.

She was squinting as she tried to come up with a good description. It was adorable.

"It's not really a dimension," she continued. "It's more like a state of being. Our souls can travel these states, but our shells can't. Of course, its not like we can just go anywhere we want. There are rules, and that assures that Heaven is never overrun with sinners or demons."

"And that the moderates are given a chance to prove where they belong?" I asked.

She nodded. "That came much later, but yes. Purgatory is the buffer, the demilitarized zone if you will, but you must already know about that. It's the reason you and I can never be friends."

I don't know why, but when she said that, it hurt. More than it probably should have, I hardly knew her after all.

"You think the Rapture is a good thing?" I asked.

Josette looked up at me, and her eyes flashed in anger, but she covered it up quickly.

"Let us not get into that, Landon," she replied. "We will never agree. That is the nature of who we are, and it is best that we accept it and move on."

She had a point.

"So," she continued, "if Heaven is right here, but in another state of existence, than it is no large matter for a being such as myself who resides in both states to move from one to the other, at least in part. In essence, I can reach through from one dimension to another, where I know I left my blade."

"Neat trick," I said. "But why can't I do it?"

"Two reasons. The first is that you aren't powerful enough, not yet anyway. It took me five hundred years to learn how to reach through the dimensions. The second is because you don't exist outside of this state," she said.

"You're saying that Purgatory is part of Earth?" I asked.

"Yes. And no." She stood up and swept the scratches away with her boot.

"How can that be?" I asked, rising to join her. "How could millions of souls be living here, and nobody has ever seen them, heard them, or knows that they exist?"

"We are Divine, Landon. We decide what mankind knows about us. We control them, in order to protect them."

Like in the park. The area where we had fought the Great Were had been deserted even though it was the middle of the day.

"Why do the demons control them?" I asked. It couldn't be to protect.

"To use," she said. "As you have already discovered, information is the highest form of power and control. People are easily corrupted by promises of knowledge that will give them an edge." The same way I had been. "Now put up your sword."

She spent the next hour instructing me on how to hold a sword without cutting myself on it. She said I was a natural, but she said it sarcastically. By the end of the hour I could almost hold the thing steady, but it felt heavy and awkward in my hand, and I had no confidence at all in my ability to use it. We took a break, and I grilled her a bit more.

"What happens when a Divine dies?" I asked. We were sitting cross-legged in the center of the rooftop facing one another, our blades resting across our legs.

She shook her head. "Dying as a Divine is like dying as a mortal. Nobody knows for sure what happens, only that we do not return to where we came from. As my Lord has no knowledge of this end, I have always thought that we cease to be."

"I've been making the same assumption," I said. "Demons can be killed by…" I hung the end of the sentence, waiting for her to finish it.

"A seraph's blade, as you have already learned. Many demons also have a weakness to one of the four elements of life. Which one depends on the type of demon. Lesser demons like werewolves are susceptible to earth. All Divines can be killed by decapitation.

Including you."

Decapitation was not a pretty thought, but I had assumed as much. Once the head and body were separate, which one was going to grow back? I could picture myself like a hydra, duplicating every time something lopped off my noggin.

“Silver, wooden stakes?” I asked.

“It can slow earth sensitives down, but won’t kill,” she replied. “You’ve seen too many movies.”

"Part of it is true,” I said in my defense. “What about holy water?"

"Ineffective as a weapon,” she said, “but it can heal any demon inflicted wound. It helps us to counter our greatest weakness."

"Which is?" I asked.

She started to speak, then thought about it. "Our greatest known weakness I mean. We need blessed blades to kill a demon. All demons can harm us with little more than a fingernail. As long as they break the skin, their touch is poison."

"So what about mine?" I asked.

"Yours?" She was confused.

"My touch," I said.

I had posed the question innocently enough, but her face flushed again. She stammered out her reply. "I uh... I really don't know. I haven't... I haven't been in that situation before. With a diuscrucis."

"You sure are demure for a seven hundred year old," I said, trying to keep the conversation light. I found her reaction intriguing, but I wasn't about to press her on it.

Josette conjured her sword and pointed it at me. "Shut up and fight," she said between laughs.

She spent another hour teaching me basic technique, which meant how to swing the blade without losing control of it, and how to get myself back into position to either attack again or defend myself. The night was wearing on, and the weather was getting colder, so I appreciated the fact that I was now immune to temperature changes. The earlier rain returned as snow, falling in heavy flakes that clung to everything they landed on, including us.

"Seven hundred years would mean you lived in the middle ages," I said.

We were taking another break, and I had decided I wanted to know more about my teacher than I did about anything else. I was getting a little tired of demons and fighting, and it was the closest I

could get to so-called normalcy.

Josette nodded. "I was born in Paris. My father was a wealthy merchant who had close ties to the Catholic Church. I grew up in a privileged household, and wanted for nothing. It was not always an easy life, for my parents were very religious, and punished my brother and I severely for our sins. Still, it was a good life, especially for those times. You may think I was perfect because I am a seraph today, but I was not always the most well-behaved child."

"Good enough for Heaven," I said. "Besides, what child can ever avoid making a little mischief?"

"Yes," she agreed. "Good enough. My brother and I, we used to go down into the city dressed in rags and act as beggars. We would take the money we collected and spend it on sweets."

Her eyes were alight with the pleasure of the memory, and I could feel the warmth of her radiating and soaking into my skin. She was silent for a moment while she reminisced, and then her mood changed.

"When our parents found out, they took us out to the barn and tied us to a post, then used a riding crop to give us ten lashes each," she said. "Afterwards, they made us work to earn back all of the money we had stolen from the real poor, and go out to the city and distribute it to them."

I couldn't believe it. "Are you kidding me? Your parents sound like monsters."

She shook her head. "Do not misunderstand me, Landon. My parents could be as loving as they could be cruel, and the pain they inflicted served to teach us to be humble and always remember that service to God means caring for the less fortunate. I hated my parents for a time, because of what they had done, but after I had passed to Heaven, I realized what they had taught me."

"I'm sure there were less violent ways to teach a child a lesson like that," I said. I was getting angry thinking about it. Not that there was anything to do. I reminded myself that it had happened hundreds of years ago.

"You are right about that," she said. "My parents spent many years in Purgatory due to their treatment of their children. In the end they proved that their souls were essentially good, and they were misguided in their faith. They sought me out as soon as they entered Heaven, and begged for my forgiveness."

That cooled my anger a little bit at least. "What about your

brother? It sounds like you two were very close."

Her eyes dimmed so completely it was as if they had gone black. So much emotion in those eyes, it was an amazing thing to experience, though it seemed to amplify her feelings to the point that I was experiencing them too. It felt as though a ten thousand pound weight had been dropped on my chest as a mixture of sadness and fury.

"He did not respond as well to my parent's teachings," she said. "He became violent, angry, and withdrawn. He left home when he was sixteen."

Tears started rolling down her cheeks, and I could tell there was more she wanted to say, but wasn't able to. The answer was written in her eyes, in plain sight to me. He had killed her.

"Josette, it's okay," I said, reaching out and putting my hand on her shoulder. "You don't need to talk about it. I can see it in your eyes. I'm so sorry."

Those same eyes widened when I said that, and she turned her head away from me. She hadn't known I could read her like that. Not knowing any better, I had just assumed it was normal.

"Thank you," she said. "No matter how many years have passed, the memory is a torment on my soul."

I didn't think, just acted. I reached out and put my arms around her, wrapping her small body up into a hug. She stiffened at first, not expecting the maneuver, then melted into my arms.

"Seven hundred years, Landon," she said between open sobs. "Yet it still feels as if it happened yesterday. I joined the Order of Seraph because I didn't want such a fate to befall anyone else. I have saved hundreds of innocents from the hands of evil men and demons alike. Men that you will help one day."

She just had to say it. Maybe it was just due to her emotional state, but I didn't appreciate it. I pushed her out of the embrace, holding her at arms length.

"I'm all for saving innocents, Josette," I told her.

She smiled at me, wiping away my anger in an instant. "I believe that about you. And right now you can do so without consequence. What happens when the balance is restored, should good begin to triumph? That is the nature of who you are, and the mission that you have accepted. For all the good you may feel and show today, there is a devilish side to you, or you would not be what you are."

I didn't know what to say. She wasn't completely right, but she

wasn't completely wrong. I had choked the Priest when he had resisted giving me what I wanted. I knew there was a part of me that could harm innocents if it meant achieving my goals. Admitting that to myself was difficult. It scared the crap out of me. Admitting it to her, impossible.

"I guess I'll worry about that if and when it happens," I said, letting go of her. "I have a lot of good work to do in the meantime." I went over and picked up my sword from where it was resting against the rooftop ledge. "Show me something else."

She didn't respond right away. She looked at me with a mix of fear and admiration. Her eyes told me as much. When she realized she was telegraphing her feelings to me, she turned away again.

"Please stop," she said.

"I'm not doing it on purpose," I told her. "Your eyes shift and change with your emotions. For whatever reason, I understand what the variations mean."

"You shouldn't be able to do that," she said.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "It's making me uncomfortable though. I feel naked in a way that goes so far beyond the physical."

I understood her perspective, but the selfish part of me didn't want to give up watching her eyes. The experience of seeing her emotions that way was intoxicating.

"I'll try not to look at your eyes," I told her. "But you should know they are incredibly beautiful and expressive."

She reddened again, but didn't say anything. Her sword materialized in her hand. "Shall we?"

"Thank you for doing this Josette," I said.

"I am repaying a debt to you fellow," she replied. "Nothing more."

I didn't want to look at her eyes, but I couldn't help stealing a glance. There was a hint of brighter golden flecks at the edges, which danced along the outer rim. She was lying. It was enough for me that I knew. I didn't call her on it.

"Still," I said. "Thank you."

The moment was broken by a scream that sent a shiver down the base of my spine. I felt an almost primal pull towards the source of the sound, a few blocks away from the rooftop where we stood. Josette had sensed it too, and she turned and began running along the rooftop in the direction of the noise. I stood frozen in place,

watching her as she bounded onto the ledge of the building and leapt, landing on the opposite rooftop twenty feet away and continuing forward with ease. I knew what I had to do if I was to follow.

"Crap," I said, breaking into a run, following in the angel's footsteps.

I made the leap without a problem, and this time I decided to do a controlled roll, pitching my shoulder forward and flipping over and back to my feet as I hit the snowy ground and lost my footing. I was rewarded with a half success, my arm blossomed with pain as my shoulder dislocated, but I managed to get back up and start running forward again without losing too much momentum. By the time I pulled myself through the jump across to the next rooftop, my arm was healed.

I caught up to Josette leaning over the ledge of the building, peering down into the alley. I pulled up beside her and looked down. Two girls stood shivering together in a corner, holding each other for support while six men blocked their escape out of the alley. The girls were wearing short, tight skirts and down jackets, obviously heading to or from a club or party of some kind.

"Watch me," Josette said, "And try to learn something."

With that, she was over the ledge, dropping forty feet to the ground and landing ever so gently behind the men and the two girls. She didn't have her sword, not yet.

“Leave them alone, or I’m calling the police,” she said to them, getting their attention. All six turned to face her at once.

"What the hell is this," I heard one of the men say to the others.

"Are you lost little girl," another one said, laughing.

"You know what?" the first one asked his friends. "Now there's more to go around." They all laughed then.

The first one stopped laughing when Josette's foot connected with his face. There was an audible crack as his jaw crushed under the force, and a few of his teeth went flying from his mouth. He dropped like the sack of crap he was.

The second attacker fell before he could overcome his shock, a heeled boot to the groin creating more misery than he could handle. He lay on the ground twitching, and Josette turned her attention to the other four.

Knives had been pulled, and one of the scumbags had a gun. There was a loud pop, and Josette's arm was shoved violently back

as blood sprouted from her shoulder. Two more pops, two more sprays of blood, and she fell backward onto the ground.

Panicked, I jumped up onto the ledge, prepared to drop myself into the fray. I shouldn't have bothered though. I had forgotten a simple lesson that I already knew. As the gunman approached Josette to pour a few more rounds into her, she shot up at him, slamming him in the face with her palm. His head bounced backward, his neck broken, and he fell to the ground.

I had thought seeing her leap back into action like that would have sent the remaining attackers running. Then I noticed that the first guy was back on his feet. His fingers had grown out into claws, and a set of fangs hung out of his mouth. Vampires!

He leapt up and clung to the side of the building across from me, circling around Josette while she was distracted by the other attackers, who had also revealed their true nature. I saw Josette reach for her sword, preparing to engage them. She didn't know the first one was getting the drop on her. I took that as my cue.

I flexed my legs and focused as I sprang from the rooftop, pulling myself across the gap and down onto the sneaky son of a bitch. It was a formless maneuver, but it worked. My body slammed into his, and we both plummeted to the ground. Luckily for me, he broke my fall. He hissed and growled beneath me in a mixture of anger and pain. I rolled off, more so I could get my bearings than in response to his protests.

He was one ugly dude, his features lumpy and twisted, his fangs crooked in his mouth. He rolled onto his knees. I didn't need any kind of special perception to know what came next. I ducked under his leap, and then turned to track him. I saw Josette out of the corner of my eye, her sword a blur as she twirled through the rest of the demonic mass. The second vampire had regained his senses and rejoined the fray as well.

I would have loved nothing more than to watch her and learn, as she had requested. Instead, I was preparing for the vampire's next move while wishing I had some silver on me. Heck, I would have settled for a wooden stake or some garlic and taken my chances. I crouched into the position Josette had taught me, even though I had neglected to bring my sword along for this ride. If nothing else it would help me react faster to my opponent's offensive. I hoped.

He eyed me cautiously, unsure of my position in the fight. He

jerked left and right a couple of times, trying to judge my reaction time. Then he smiled, and I felt each individual nail of one of his buddies' hands slice its way down my back. I fell forward onto the ground, wondering what had happened to Josette that one had gotten past her. I listened for the sound of battle, but heard nothing. This was bad.

The wound healed quickly enough, but I decided to play injured while I got a better feel for the situation. I focused on my hearing, taking in the sounds around me. The shuffling of feet as the vampires rounded up the two girls, who were crying in between prayers. A body being dragged along the ground, the leather of her boots making a distinct noise against the pavement. The two assholes that dropped me were beginning to lean in to check on my health. I needed a plan, and fast.

Not enough time. They were on me in an instant. The vamp that nailed me from behind rolled me over, grabbed my throat, and lifted me up as high as his arm could reach. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I spit on him.

He didn't like that very much. He responded by rearing back and throwing me at the side of the building. My face slammed into the brick, my nose shattering from the force. I hit the ground and rolled over to face them, my vision fuzzy. I could make out the two girls being tied up together. I could see Josette's prone form leaned against the building opposite me. My attackers had lost interest in me, either taking me for dead or just not feeling at all threatened. I coughed out some blood and rose to my feet.

I looked over at Josette, and my anger flared. I didn't seem to be able to control much of my power yet, but it seemed to have a way of making itself known when I got pissed or beat up. I could feel it now in the base of my spine, strength I couldn't tap into in calmer moments. It called to me, begged for release, a siren's call to accept what was offered. All reason vanished as my human mind faded into the background, replaced with clear burning purpose.

I knew myself, but lost myself. My mind became an engine to a singular goal, my emotions devolving into chaos. I could feel every vein and muscle in my body. I could hear the roar of my blood vessels pumping energy into me. I heard my clothes tearing as my body shifted and changed, into what I didn't know and in the moment couldn't care. I let out a roar so loud it shook the entire alley, breaking the lower windows of the buildings around me. This

got the vampires' attention. As one they turned to look at me. I could smell their fear. It was intoxicating.

I heaved myself forward with unexpected speed and ease, leaping the distance between the vampires and myself. I grabbed the nearest one in both hands and easily ripped his head from his torso, taking pleasure in the sound of the tearing, the end of his existence. I rounded on the others, lashing out and cutting another from head to toe with my razor sharp claws. Their confidence was shattered, their fear ruling their actions.

They moved as one to get away from me, breaking off down the alley at a run. I crouched and leaped, landing on another vampire's back and ripping his head from his shoulders. I pounced again and shredded the fourth. Moments later I had dismembered the remaining attackers and turned back to where the two girls were standing, silent and motionless, hoping I wouldn't notice them.

I bounded down the alley on all fours, stopping in front of them. I looked down on the pitiful creatures, my eyes drawn to the shadowy darkness at the center of their chests. I shifted back into my human form, dressed in a pair of black pants, a white shirt with a vest over it, and a long leather morning jacket. I had a small dagger in my hand, and one thought on my mind.

The girls trembled as I approached them, drew back in fear as I raised the dagger. I brought it close to the taller one. She had long raspberry blonde hair and smelled like lemon. I pressed it against her chest, then slid it down to begin cutting through her blouse.

My heart thudded in my chest, and my mind was overwhelmed by every sense of them - the sight, the smell, the anticipation of the taste and touch. A small voice in my mind told me to stop, but I couldn't. I wanted this so much. My mind was mired in an evil place, no longer completely my own. I had traded control for power, and the power filled me with a primal lust.

I don't know what would have happened if Josette hadn't come to. I don't know what I would have done to those girls if she hadn't stopped me. One moment I was preparing to do vile things to them, the next I was skewered on the end of her sword.

She ran it through my stomach and used it to pull me back, away from the girls. She produced a dagger to cut their bonds, held her hand up to them, and whispered something in a language I didn't understand. They gained this blank, confused expression and fled from the alley. Josette turned me on the sword and slammed

me back up against the wall.

"Landon," she said.

I didn't know who Landon was... yes, I did. I was Landon. Wasn't I?

"I warned you about the cost of using the demon's power," she said.

Demon's power. I tried to make sense of the words. They sounded like little more than moans through mud. It was slow, but the pain helped me stay focused on it. The power. I could still feel the source of it, pulsing in my spine, reveling in the chaos and destruction, screaming out in agony at the blade that was piercing my flesh.

Chaos. Destruction. Demon. My mind started to put the puzzle pieces together. The process was slow and agonizing, but I wrested back control, forcing the power to subside. All the while, Josette held me against the wall, her golden eyes fearful and sad.

"Josette," I said. "It hurts."

She knew I was back. I don't know how. She pulled the sword from my gut and took a shaky step back. Her own energy was exhausted, and she was bleeding from her temple. The second the blade was free. I fell to the ground, first to vomit, and then to sob. What had I done? What had I almost done? What had I become? It was all too much for me to handle. My body quaked as I cried.

Josette knelt down next to me and put her hand on my shoulder. She didn't say anything. She just let me know she was there. I appreciated it. It was something sane and peaceful for me to grab onto, to identify myself with. The pain took some time to subside, the pace of my healing seemed to be affected by the source of the wound.

After what seemed like hours I was able to calm myself, to stop the flow of tears, to roll to a sitting position. When I looked at Josette, I saw that she had been crying too.

"Let's get out of here," I said to her.

She nodded, and we helped each other to our feet. I tried to ignore the disintegrating bodies of the vampires as we made our way out of the alley. Sure, they were demons. Sure they were evil, at least in the greater hierarchy of the Divine. It didn't make the act of killing any easier.

We carried each other back to my room at the Belmont. Once we got there, I doused another rag with holy water and put it over

the wound on her head. She smiled at me as I did it, placing her hand over mine.

"The demon will try to entice you with promises of power," she told me. "Do not give in. What he seeks is to own you, or to destroy you so that he can be set free."

"I never meant for this to happen," I said. "How do I stop it?"

"I will teach you," she said. "But not tonight. Rest now, Landon. You have earned it."

She took my hand and kissed it, my body electrified by the warmth of her lips. I had intended to crash on the couch, but I didn't make it that far. One moment I was awake, the next I wasn't. When morning came, she was gone.

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8

The sun was doing its best to get through the crud covered windows when I woke the next morning. My eyes opened slowly, and I experienced a moment of euphoria at the fact that I was alive, until I remembered with certainty that I wasn't really. Until I recalled what had transpired a few hours earlier. If there had been anything in my stomach, I would have expelled it. Instead I dry heaved off the edge of the bed for a minute before gaining enough of my senses to get control of my repulsion.

I scanned the apartment looking for Josette, but I knew right away that she was gone. She had told me she would teach me, and she hadn't been lying, so I just assumed she would be back. I went into the bathroom to look at myself in the mirror. I was still wearing the clothes the demon had put me in. I couldn't get them off fast enough. I tossed them in a pile and jumped into the shower, enjoying the cleansing feeling of the water as it rained down onto me. It didn't matter that it was tinged orange with rust, or that it sputtered and choked its way out of the pipe. My requirements were simple, and it fulfilled them.

Afterward, I spent a bit of time trying to will myself some new threads. Meeting only failure, I resigned myself to wearing the bloodstained mess of clothes I had discarded. Once I had put them on, I discovered that while I couldn't create cloth from thin air, I could rearrange the existing material. I put myself in a black collared shirt and blue jeans, with silver tipped black boots. I didn't know if the silver was real or just a facsimile. I hoped I didn't need to find out.

The next order of business was to get some food into my stomach. As I made my way out of the Belmont, it occurred to me that I probably didn't need to sleep or eat. Like the cold, perhaps these too were mortal desires that my brain was continuing to cling to. I didn't mind the hunger part too much. I liked to eat.

I made my way out of the beat down section of town, keeping myself alert to any other Divines that may have been wandering Manhattan. It was almost three in the afternoon, and the city was in full swing. If it would be hard for me to pick them out in a crowd, the same could be said for my own exposure. I found a crowded deli to duck into to grab a bite to eat - Pastrami on rye, a pickle, a knish and a large coffee. I located a small empty table and sat down, picked up my sandwich and took a huge bite. I hadn't realized how hungry I was.

"Ah, pastrami. Did you know that pastrami was invented by the Ottoman Empire during the middle ages? It was even before my time."

I knew that voice. I looked up from my meal to see Dante in the chair across from me, a huge smile on his narrow face. He was still wearing the same suit, but now there was a single red rose pinned to his breast.

"Buongiorno Signore," he said, his mood jovial. "How was your first day back among the living?"

I dropped my sandwich.

"I'm still here," I said.

I felt… what? Anger, relief, frustration, sadness, joy? I had been waiting for Dante. Now that he was here, I wasn't sure I wanted him to be. I had no doubt he wouldn't think too highly about the relationship I had struck up with Josette.

"Yes, you are," he replied. He reached over and picked up my pickle, taking a bite out of the end. "Impressive on its own, given the circumstances. Was my gift helpful?"

I laughed out loud, attracting the attention of the people around me. "You could say that," I said. "Although I think paper might have been a little more durable." I told him about my run-in with Rebecca. He seemed amused.

"Come Signore," he said. "Let's go somewhere we can talk about more serious things." He reached over and put his hand on my shoulder, and we were back at the Belmont.

"Isn't that trick reserved for Mr. Ross?" I asked him. The quick trip had left me feeling a little lightheaded. "How did you know where I was staying anyway?"

"Mr. Ross' talents with transportation dwarf my own. I do have some abilities though, within a limited area of effect. As to your second question, I didn't," he said. "I just asked your subconscious to take us to a familiar place." He looked around. "You haven't figured out what to do with the blank card yet, have you?"

I had forgotten about the card. I dug it out of my pocket and looked at it, twirling it over in my fingers. I had an idea of what he was getting it.

"I've been a little busy trying not to have my face ripped off," I responded. "In any case, I'm done stealing other people's money."

I looked up at Dante. I don't think he heard me. He was consumed with deconstructing the apartment with his eyes, apparently not impressed by the accommodations.

"You don't like how I decorated the place?" I asked.

He turned on me, a look in his eyes that caused me to take a few steps back. An instant later it was gone, and he was smiling again.

"Not what I would have chosen," he said. "Now, why don't you tell me about the seraph."

Josette wasn't there, but I should have known that Dante would be able to sense her. It was nothing that he could have physically seen, but I knew there was an indelible presence of her hanging in the air. I had felt it the moment I had woken up, and it still sat in the apartment like a spring breeze. Oh well, no denying it.

"Just someone I met yesterday," I said. "The only one who didn't try to rip my face off. Well, she wanted to, but we came to an understanding."

Dante sat himself on the dilapidated sofa. "You came to an understanding with an angel? What kind of understanding?"

"Simple really," I said. "I kill some demons, she doesn't kill me."

He laughed at this. "As if she could," he said. "No Signore, it is

not as simple as you say. The seraph Calmed you."

I didn't like the way he said it, and I didn't like the way it sounded. "Calmed?"

"Angels don't have dirty tricks," he said. "They don't lie, at least not well, and certainly not well enough to fool you. They won't stab you in the back or aim to outright deceive you. Instead they have the power to Calm. To put you at ease, and make you start talking about whatever they want to know."

I thought back to when we had sat together in the park. "Right, yeah, she did that to me. We came to the understanding after that. At first, she thought I was an angel, but she was suspicious, so she Calmed me."

He seemed surprised and puzzled. "She thought you were an angel?"

"Yup," I said. "I was in the Apple store up on Fifth Avenue, and she was in there with a friend. I noticed her, and I knew what she was right away, so I did my best to get out of there as fast as I could. It wasn't fast enough though, she spotted me and we left the store together. It was like she opened a port to my soul. I could hear her speaking to me, but she wasn't actually talking. She called me 'fellow'."

"Interesting. Angels rarely communicate with each other verbally, it's just safer for them that way. The fact that she was even able to establish a connection with you is incredible. This is not a trait that I believed diuscrucis possessed, and I am certain it was not in Charis' repertoire. You said that Rebecca mistook you for an angel also?"

I took a seat on the couch across from Dante. "Yeah. She said I smelled like an angel, but when she got up close she realized she was wrong. Here's the crazy part, I got marked as a demon by a couple of Touched. They would have killed me, but Rebecca showed up and stopped them."

"Why would she do that?" he asked.

His expression was pure confusion. His question was whispered as if he was asking it of himself. I could tell he was fighting hard to make sense of the whole thing.

"She said she's done the math and realized that if Hell wins, vampires are going to become the new food source. She's not so sure she wants to play on the Devil's team anymore because there isn't much of a future in it for her."

Dante didn’t look convinced. "A vampire does not just change sides,” he said. “To do so would make them a target for every demon on Earth. She may have helped you this once, but I would be wary of her true motives."

I hadn’t thought about it, but it made sense. "Agreed," I said.

"Very good,” he said. “Now, back to the seraph. You said you met her in Central Park, but she was in this apartment. She Calmed you in this apartment. I can feel the residual energy."

Calmed me here? I didn't think so. Sure, I could feel the energy too, but that was just *her* .

"Sorry Dante, but we were definitely in the park. We were attacked by a demon, a Great Were. We killed it together. She was injured, I brought her here and healed her wounds with some holy water."

I hadn't finished speaking when his expression darkened, his eyes turned black, and he rose to his feet. The next thing I knew, I was pinned against the wall by an invisible force that I couldn't break.

"You healed her," he shouted. "The seraphim are our enemies! How dare you!"

I tried to move, but it was an overwhelming effort just to gather the willpower to make the attempt. Every muscle in my body cried out in exhaustion, and even my eyes began to feel heavy. I could feel the evil soul inside me stirring, offering me the power to break free of these bonds and destroy the one who held me here. I could sense my growing anger, and the temptation that accompanied it. I remembered what Josette had told me. Not this time.

"What right do you have to judge me," I yelled back with all of the force I could muster. I doubted if it had come out as more than a whisper. "You dumped me here to fend for myself, the only thing you told me was that the balance had to be maintained. I don't know if you noticed, but the balance is totally out of whack."

As quickly as his anger had risen, it subsided. He lowered me to the floor and bowed his head.

"I am sorry, Signore,” he said. “Your words are true. I have no right to judge you. Please forgive me."

He spoke with such honest regret, my own anger faded as well. I shook my arms out to make sure I was back to normal. Everything seemed to be functioning okay.

"It's all right," I said. "There's something else you should know.

After I killed the demon, somehow I absorbed its soul."

Dante's smile returned. "You killed a Great Were, and you captured his soul? Fantastico!"

It was my turn to be confused. "Josette made it sound like it was a bad thing."

"Maybe for her," he replied. "Do not be afraid to make use of every tool at your disposal, Landon. The seraph will tell you that capturing souls this way is dangerous, but while you remain in control you can use this power to your advantage."

"What if I don't remain in control?" I asked.

"You have more power than you realize," he replied. "I think it will be very difficult for you to lose control so completely that the demon can subsume you."

Maybe not completely, but what horrible things would I do while I was under the influence? I wasn't so sure Dante was right about that one, his scruples seemed to be a little shaky when pitted against getting what he wanted. I decided that I would do my best to avoid absorbing any more souls and to fight against the temptation to let the beast loose. I needed Josette to come back and teach me how to keep to that decision.

Josette. Dante said she had Calmed me in the apartment before he had gotten all ape-crap angry on me. I knew she hadn't. I could clearly remember when she had, so I would have remembered if it had happened again. We had fought the vampires, and then come back to the apartment. She told me to get some rest, kissed my hand, and that was it. I had fallen asleep immedia… Oh, crap.

"She put me to sleep," I said to Dante.

"She Calmed you," Dante replied. "Putting you out is a more advanced form, but it is the same thing. A powerful seraph would be able to Calm you, and then press you for information while you slept."

She had played me like a game of Pac-man. She had made me think she was helping me, when in fact she just wanted information, but about what?

"What kind of information would she think I would have?" I asked Dante.

I felt my insides being ripped out, the anger and hurt of her betrayal sending chills through my body. I was too inexperienced, too naive. I had trusted her way too easily. I could feel my pulse quickening, the heat rising to my face.

"You are familiar with the Chalice, the Grail?" Dante asked. His words snapped my ricocheting mind back into focus.

"The one from the Last Supper?" I asked. "The one I was guarding?"

He nodded. "The same. It is the reason I came to see you today, the reason I am so thankful that you were delivered to me when you were. The demons have captured it and plan to use it to complete their victory. You have to stop them."

Stop them. Yeah, right. Me. I couldn't even take out a messenger demon without help.

"Captured it?" I asked. "It wasn't exactly under guard. I mean, the demon who took it just waltzed right in to the Museum and plucked it right out of a bulletproof, tamper-proof case like it was made of fog."

"No, Signore," Dante said. "That was your experience, but not even close to the whole story. So that you will understand, let me first tell you the history of the Chalice. Do you recall what I told you about Jesus?"

I nodded. It hadn't been that long ago, though at times it felt like ages.

"Then the important part that you understand is that he was real," he said, "and he was the embodiment of God on Earth. From the moment he was born he knew when and how he would die, for it had been arranged by God in the hopes that his martyrdom would push the human race to a higher level of goodness. In some respects his plan was successful, for many mortals have done endless good deeds in His name. In other respects, it was a dismal failure. Corrupt kings under demonic influence used the name of God and the birthplace of His Son as an excuse for war and violence.

The final night of his life, Jesus took the Chalice and filled it with his blood, granting it to his disciples to imbue them with the diluted power of God. It was in this way that the first of the warrior angels were ordained, though they did not gain most of their power until after their death. The Chalice, having held the blood of God, also developed power of its own. For humans, it could grant eternal youth and rejuvenation."

"What about for the angels? Or the demons?" I asked. The story of the Holy Grail was nothing new to anybody. The fact that there was truth to the tale was the incredible part.

"Nobody knows how it affects the angels," Dante replied. "After

the Last Supper, the Chalice was passed to a mortal warrior, a non-disciple who was loyal to Jesus. He was charged with protecting the secret of the Grail, and ensuring its safety for all eternity. Because of Judas, the secret did not stay that way among the demons for very long. The warrior spent many years in hiding, organizing a secret army known as the Knights Templar in order to help him guard it. The Templar Knights were granted a drink from the Chalice, and were armed by the angels with blessed weapons to assist in the battle against the demon hordes. For hundreds of years, the Templars kept the Chalice safe.

The Industrial Revolution has not been kind to the Templars, or Heaven in general. With the growth of science and reasoned thinking came the dilution of the faithful, with more and more turning away from religion in return for logic. The Templars have become unable to maintain their number, and so their power has continued to diminish.

It was decided that the Chalice would be gifted to the Vatican and revealed to mankind so that it could be preserved in the open and guarded more easily. Once something has been brought to the human consciousness it becomes impossible to take away. The Grail became a part of the mortal world, and as such mortals as well as angels kept watch over it and protected it. The value of using the Chalice was minor compared to the harm that would befall Heaven should it be lost to the demons."

"It has been lost to the demons," I reminded him.

"Yes, Signore, it has," he said. "The Templars underestimated the power of the Demon Queen. In your mortal mind, you may have thought the Chalice was unguarded. In fact, three angels and a dozen Templars were in or around the Museum on the day you were killed, including the warrior who was given the Grail by Christ himself over two thousand years before. The most powerful mortals the world has ever known did battle with the Demon Queen in the basement of the museum. All were defeated."

I felt my breath get choked off, my terrified heart unwilling to draw in more oxygen. I thought back to my final living memory, to the woman who had taken the Chalice, and my life.

"The woman who stole the Chalice. She was the Demon Queen?" I asked. "As in, the wife of the Devil?"

"No," he said. "When I use the word Queen, I use it in a more hierarchical term of power. She is not wed to the Devil. Rather, she

is the most powerful female demon waging war in the mortal realm."

"And you want me to stop her?" If I had been able to breathe, I probably would have laughed at the absurdity of the thought.

"You do not need to confront her head on to stop her," Dante said. "What you must do is recover the Chalice, and make sure it becomes lost for all time. Mr. Ross has told me that the demons are using it to create these."

Dante reached into the inner pocket of his blazer and produced a simple iron necklace with a liquid filled container hanging from it. The container looked like glass, or crystal. The fluid was a blackish, reddish color. It undulated and flowed inside its cage as if it had a life of its own. It looked familiar.

"They spill their blood into the Chalice and mix it with the blood of a mortal," he explained, "then trap it in a crystal which has been cursed by a powerful demon. Any demon who wears one becomes almost invincible."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the necklace I had captured from the Great Were. Dante looked at it with surprise.

"It doesn't work if it isn't touching them," I told him.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"The Great Were had one," I said. "He let the seraph run him through so he could show her how it worked. I pulled it off his neck before I killed him."

Dante's face lit up with another of his familiar smiles. "Excellente! You have already discovered a weakness."

I wasn't as enthused. "It isn't much of a weakness. It was closer to dumb luck, really."

Dante was unswayed. "Maybe not a huge weakness, but any advantage will make this an easier task. Already demons are becoming bolder, attacking angels with a comfort level never before seen, and taking mortals for sacrifice in increasing numbers. If we do not stop them, Armageddon will happen sooner than we could ever want."

I wasn't feeling very confident about this, but what choice did I have? For better or worse I had agreed to be mankind's Champion. Going down fighting had to be better than toiling away in Purgatory for the rest of eternity.

"I could use some help," I said.

Dante held his hands in front of him. "My apologies, but I have

none to offer beyond Mr. Ross' extraordinary ability to gather information. I had thought to teach you basic skills before sending you from Purgatory, but you have learned so much more in a single night than I could have believed. Survival will educate you far better and more quickly than I ever could."

I was being thrown to the werewolves. I don't know if Dante thought I stood a chance, but he seemed convinced that I did.

"So what do I do next?" I asked.

Dante rose from the couch and stood right in front of me, his face looking up at mine. His expression was grave.

"Survive, Signore. Survive and fight. Find out where these necklaces are being created. Find out where the Chalice is being kept. Retrieve it, and hide it from the demons, from the angels, from the humans. Let none know where it resides. Destroy these amulets and the demons that wear them. Above all, survive. I will be in touch when I have more information for you. Good luck Landon."

Without waiting for my reply, without giving me a chance to question him, to ask him about Charis, he vanished and I was alone. Maybe eternity in Purgatory wouldn't have been so bad after all.

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After Dante left, I made my way back down to the deli, only to find my sandwich had already been trashed. Slightly annoyed, I bought another one and savored every bite. As I ate, I considered everything that Dante had said and tried to decide what I should do next. I felt pressured to do as Dante had asked, but at the same time I knew that in my current state I was no match for anything much stronger than a Girl Scout. I had only defeated the vampires with a lot of help, and I wasn't feeling too good about letting the Were's soul take over again.

Despite Dante's opinion, nothing I had experienced the prior night had suggested that I would be able to regain control once I had passed it over. Add to that the fact that Josette had suckered me, and I was left feeling alone and powerless in the middle of a race to save mankind from being literally devoured by monsters. I had thought dying was the hard part. There was something funny in there somewhere, I was sure.

I took the amulet out of my pocket and took a closer look at it. To think that there was some vestige of the embodiment of God

trapped in that crystal. It was heady stuff, and it kept me captivated for a while, watching the smoky liquid ebb and flow inside its prison.

Power. That was the lock and key to all of this. Without power, I couldn't hope to carry through with my assignment. Dante was so certain I had power. He had said that Josette couldn't hope to defeat me in a flat out fight. Now that was comedy. The Demon Queen seemed to have the most power. Thinking about her ripping through the angels and the Templars to get to the Chalice made me shiver with trepidation. If I were going to survive, I would have to figure out what my power was, how much of it I had, and how best to utilize it. Did David go through this same mental exercise before he had to go out to face Goliath?

I left the deli and headed back to the Belmont. I stopped at my room to grab the seraphim sword and demonic dagger, and carried them to the roof. Once there, I dropped into the pose Josette had taught me hours earlier. I ran through the limited exercises she had shown me with abandon, trying to free myself from the bonds of humanity that I knew I was clinging onto. In the last twenty-four hours I had seen and done things that I knew were impossible as part of a normal human existence, but normalcy had been left far behind, and now I was part of something that rose above mortality, that lorded over it in a sickly sweet dance with one too many partners. I was the odd man out, and I would have to earn my place in line.

When I slipped on an icy patch and landed on my ass, I gave up on the swordplay. Maybe this was how the angels handled conflict, but it just wasn't working for me. I was born in an age of weapons of mass destruction, missile toting drones, and frickin' laser beams. I needed my own approach.

Embarrassed and angry for having fallen, I cast my gaze to a large piece of the building's frieze that had crumbled at some point over the last century. I thought first about the rain making exercise, and then changed my focus from condensing water vapor, to expanding the air trapped inside the cement. I felt the now familiar tug in my mind and watched the chunk of wall burst outward as no more than powder. Now that's what I was talking about!

I got a little bit punch drunk on my newfound ability to pulverize rock, and I spent the better part of an hour blasting small chunks of stone out of the roof of the Belmont. As time wore on, I

could feel my concentration improving, my control improving. I still failed to get results three out of every ten tries, but it was progress, and I was happy with it. I felt alive, and strong! Better than I had ever felt before.

I picked up the sword again and charged toward the metal door to the stairwell, racing forward and focusing my will along the blade, making it sharper, stronger. I took a nasty hack and laughed as the blade ripped through the door, shredding it almost in half. Intoxicated, I threw a fist at the top half and watched as it knocked the weakened door off its hinges and over the edge of the rooftop. A moment later I heard it crash onto the empty alley below. Power. It was raw, unchained, and somewhat uneven, but it was there, and it was mine.

I left the rooftop in ruins before I retreated back to my room. I didn't know how much my display of rock-smashing would help me in a real fight, but if nothing else I felt a little bit less like a piece of meat dangling from a large hook. With any luck, I'd at least be able to make myself look formidable, even if I couldn't seal the deal.

I stripped off my clothes and hopped into the shower. I didn't need it to stay clean or smell fresh, but I had always found the feeling of the water and the small space of the stall helped me focus my thoughts, and I had a lot to think about. First, there was the matter of the Chalice. I needed to find it, but I had no idea where to look, or even where to begin looking.

I was pretty sure that the demon Reyzl would have the intel I needed, but there was no way I was in any shape to confront a major power like that. I doubted I ever would be. Moving stuff around for a few seconds was a parlor trick compared to what I imagined a major demon was capable of.

No, I needed to start at the bottom, to find the lowest rung on the ladder that might be able to point me in the right direction, and to stay near the bottom of the barrel for as long as I could. Surprise was my only real advantage right now. I had used it to the fullest against the Great Were, and I needed to do the same here. I closed my eyes and let the water run down my body, listening to the sound of it as it dripped off my limbs and landed on the chipped and scratched porcelain below.

My second problem was a little more complicated. Josette. She would be back to see me at some point, I was sure of it. Whether it would be as a teacher or as an inquisitor, I just had no idea. She

confused me in so many ways. She could be sweet, impulsive, playful, and light, and within an instant serious, introspective, and frightening.

She was good, and the goodness was beautiful. She had a sensitivity and empathy that I admired, and from the moment she had connected her soul to mine I had felt a bond to her that I couldn't understand or explain. I wanted to be her ally, her friend, her... I didn't know. I had thought that could have been possible, despite our differences in opinion. She seemed both open to it and against it at the same time. She had agreed to teach me even though it was against her laws. Then she had used my trust to try to wring information out of me. Information I didn't have.

What would I do when she returned? I could call her on her deception, and she would not be able to lie to me. That didn't mean she would be honest. I was learning the difference, and just knowing that there was one sucked. My other alternative was to say nothing, pretend I didn't know, and see what she did next. She hadn't gotten anything out of me, so maybe she would try again. If I were ready the next time I could catch her at it, but wouldn't I just end up right back where I was now? Either way my shot at friendship was lost, and that sucked too.

I turned off the flow of water and pushed all of the moisture off my body with a thought. I was getting pretty good at small pushes. As far as Josette was concerned, I would make a game-time decision based on whatever emotions bubbled up the next time I saw her. There was enough dishonesty going around to deny the truth from myself too. With respect to the Chalice, I had an idea on that one. It was a long shot, but long was better than none.

I finished dressing, altering my clothes into a simple black cotton collared shirt and a pair of destroyed blue jeans. Slipping back into the bedroom, I grabbed my iPad, hopped on the bed, tapped into the browser, and made my way back to SamChan. I may not be a Collector like Mr. Ross, but I did have at least one source to depend on for this type of otherwise insane information.

I found the thread from the guy with the vampire video on the third page. It had been posted a couple of days ago, and he swore up and down in his post that it was legit, that he had stumbled across two vamps fighting each other in an alley as he was heading home from work that night.

I recognized his screen name, 'Oblitrix'. He had been on the

Chan for years, working different hacking schemes for groups like Anonymous. There were a couple of replies on his thread, and they were filled with derision and jokes about random drug testing and drug-free workplaces. I spent some time staring at the screen before I hit the personal message button. I needed to get a line on someone who might have info about the Chalice, and vampires fit my decision to stick to the bottom of the power ladder to a tee. Oblitrix knew where to find them, or at least had a general idea where they might be found. I briefly thought about tracking Rebecca down on Liberty Island, but I couldn't come up with any sane reason why she would help me with this. So, I started typing.

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The message was short and cryptic, but I knew Oblitrix would be there. Getting a PM from a dead guy's account would be irresistible to a guy like him. With that taken care of, there was little else to do but wait until morning. I had about sixteen hours before the meeting, and I needed to take advantage of every minute. I propped myself up against the back of the bed and ran through the rain exercise three or four dozen times. False starts were one thing in this environment. Failure in a tight spot could mean my end.

As Dante had suggested, overexertion left me weary. I had continued my practice non-stop for almost three hours, alternating between making it rain and sending objects flying through the room. By the time my splitting headache and dead tired body demanded that I call it a night, I figured I was getting a ninety percent success rate on my efforts. During one attempt, I had even managed to keep the sword, the dagger, and my socks rotating above the bed for about twelve seconds. Not too bad for a newbie.

My mind was too tired to focus, too frenetic to sleep. Restless, I picked up the iPad and made my way over to YouTube. In my tired, restless boredom, I decided to check out some videos on sword fighting and martial arts. My own ability thus far had proven to be pathetic at best, and at the very least maybe I could learn to not be a greater threat to myself than my opponent.

I spent the next couple of hours navigating the chain of clips from one to the next, my mind vaguely aware of what I was watching as it began to settle into a deeper state of rest. I wasn't sure I needed to sleep, but I closed my eyes anyway. At some point soon after, the iPad slipped from my hand and landed on the floor next to the bed.

I woke up around eight thirty. Whether or not I needed to sleep, I felt so much better for having done so. My body felt recharged, renewed, and full of energy. My mind was clear, sharp, and focused. I had a plan, I knew what needed to be done, and I was feeling good about doing it. For the first time since I had died, or maybe even for the first time since my soul gained its first spark of life, I felt like I was in control.

I hopped out of bed, grabbed the sword and dagger, and headed out the door. Punkmo was manning the front desk when I stepped purposefully past, his eyes bloodshot and droopy as he came down from his morning high. The look he gave me reminded me that I needed to disguise the sword. I glamoured it into an umbrella before anyone sober took notice.

It was a long walk from the Belmont to Grand Central Station, so I moved at a brisk pace. As I walked, I paid extra attention to the world around me; to the smell of coffee, donuts, and fried foods permeating the morning air, to the sounds of cars driving by, people talking, high heels on cement, cell phones, car horns, sirens, beggars asking for change... Every noise was a musical note in my mind, and as I paid more attention to it I began to recognize the tune, and then to anticipate it. This was my world, and in my Awakened state I could understand it in a way that exposed every beauty it possessed and appreciate it for every nuance. To the untrained it would have seemed chaotic and disorganized, but in it I was beginning to see the balance as much as I could innately feel it. It was so much more complex than just good versus evil. It was in and of everything, and it was incredible.

Grand Central Station was a hub of activity, the famous main concourse thronged with people. They moved smoothly with and around one another, effortless in their negotiation of passage as they went about their daily lives. I spent a moment admiring the controlled chaos of the masses before heading straight for the lower concourse. I had told Oblitrix I would meet him near Track 104. He wouldn't know who he was looking for, and neither would I by sight, but I was hoping I would be able to pick him out based on his body language. He was sure to be on edge, filled with nervous, anxious anticipation. His heart would be racing, his breathing shallow, and his palms sweaty and cold. As I navigated the lower concourse towards Track 104, I paid close attention to all of the people moving through the station, watching the vibration of their

bodies, listening to their heartbeats.

I found him sitting on a bench towards the outer fringe. His body was hunched forward, his head resting on his hands, his right foot tapping at a rabbit's pace and his eyes darting back and forth to watch every person as they angled by. He was African-American, with a wide nose, small ears, and a chiseled jaw. He was wearing a black caddy hat, a heavy wool pea coat, black paratrooper pants and combat boots. He also had a black nylon messenger bag draped over his chest with a huge 'O' embroidered on the center.

I stood behind him and watched for a minute, just to make sure I had my man. I also did a quick scan of the rest of the crowd to make sure neither of us had been followed. I was just about to go over and sit next to him when someone else from the crowd approached him. The new guy said something to him, and then Oblitrix stood up and held out his hand in greeting, a big smile growing on his face. So much for my private message.

The newcomer wasn't Divine, I was sure of it. That didn't mean he was innocent though. I watched the two exchange a few more words before Oblitrix motioned to his messenger bag. I didn't need to eavesdrop on the conversation to know what was being said. I didn't even need to try to spot the bad guys when they started closing in.

I looked around, taking note of how the crowded floor was thinning out as people subconsciously decided to take a different train, stop to grab a bite to eat, or otherwise move themselves away from the incoming demons. I avoided looking at them in hopes of staying off their radar for as long as possible. Instead, I started making my way past Oblitrix and the not-me, pretending that I was vacating the area.

I was six feet away from them when my fake looked up and caught my eye. His expression changed immediately, from a warm friendliness to a fearful animosity. His eyes shifted to glance at the demons coming toward us, trying to judge his odds of survival. They weren't good.

I reached out and grabbed Oblitrix by the collar of his pea coat, pulling him backward with enough force to get his neck out of the way as a serrated dagger flashed by. Without hesitation, I lunged forward and stabbed the man with my umbrella-sword. The feeling of the blade sinking into his flesh was both sickening and satisfying, but I didn't have time to dwell on any of the emotions. I could feel

the demons' eyes on me now, recognizing me as Divine. There were four in total, approaching from each end of the concourse. Not vampires. I knew that much by the feeling of fear that started encroaching on my crumbling bravado. Whatever they were, they were higher up the ladder than I had been looking to scrap with.

"What the?" It was all Oblitrix had managed to get out during the whole maneuver. I held him up to keep him from losing his feet, and then spun him to face me.

"Oblitrix, I presume," I said. "My name is Landon, and I need you to come with me right now or we're both going to be demon food."

I didn't give him a choice. The demons didn't give me a choice. There was one direction they didn't have covered, and that was down the steps into the train tunnels. I moved my grip to Oblitrix's arm and yanked him along. It was a bad idea to be moving further away from daylight, but I didn't see that I had a choice.

"Let me go man," he cried as I pulled him.

My grip was iron as we started descending, the demons quickly gaining ground. It was my fault he had come here, so I was responsible for him. I wasn't about to let him die without a fight.

"Trust me," I said. "You don't want me to let go."

He trusted me when they burst onto the stairs. They had shed their human skins for their natural forms. At least seven feet tall, with furry humanoid bodies and long, powerful limbs that ended in sharp claws. They reminded me of werewolves, but their heads didn't look canine at all. I could hear them growling and shrieking. I could hear their claws scraping along the cement. We needed to move faster, or they needed to move slower.

I focused my will on a couple of nearby garbage cans, sending them flying towards the monsters. They danced aside without slowing, the effort not preventing them from gaining ground.

"Down the tunnel," I told Oblitrix, letting go of his arm. "Keep running, don't look back. If a train comes, get out of the way."

He was too scared to argue. I let him go and turned to face the oncoming demons. There was no way I could take on all of them at once. I wasn't even sure if I could survive against just one. There was no time left to think, just react.

I held the blessed sword in front of me the way I had seen in the videos, trying to focus myself on the task at hand. I painted a picture of calm control as I watched the demons approach

unabated, eight pairs of claws ready to rip me apart. I could hear Oblitrix hop down onto the sunken tracks behind me. I could hear his messenger bag slapping against his body while he ran.

The lead demon lunged forward, its body propelled toward me like an ugly rocket. I fought my flight reflex and held my ground, trying to keep my mind relaxed so that my subconscious sense of self-preservation could guide me. Time slowed down for me then, and I had a clear view of the oncoming demon. I could see the vector of its body towards mine, the angle of its limbs as it brought its claws to bear. I could smell the pheromones it was pushing off to enhance my sense of fear. I could taste the sickly sulfurous air that surrounded it, leaving a burnt iron residue on my tongue.

I saw its left arm flex and begin a movement intended to sever my head from my torso. I stood firm and stabbed forward with the sword, catching the demon under its collarbone. I combined its momentum with my own to deflect it away from me, sending it tumbling off the platform and onto the tracks. I could only hope that the wound was enough to be fatal.

The other three demons came in together, only a fraction of a second behind the first. Their howls were deafening as they sensed the kill. I put up the sword again, but I may as well have been holding a toothpick. I managed to block the first two attacks through either fast reflexes or dumb luck, but first one strike slipped through my defenses, and then another. Pain blossomed throughout my abdomen as their claws ripped flesh from bone and tore into my innards. I didn't know how much damage I could take, but with no way to stop the assault I had to assume they would just keep clawing until I stopped moving.

I dropped to the ground, my eyes losing focus as I struggled to put up some kind of a fight. In desperation I tried reaching out for the power of the Great Were, but even it had deserted me. For all my desire to fight for mankind, I was the guy throwing rocks at tanks.

I knew the demons were mangling my body. I could feel their claws digging into my flesh like it was just another piece of meat. I could hear their satisfied growls while they tore me apart, their bloodlust in full control. My vision was blurring, and I was starting to feel really warm. I didn't know what would happen to me or where I was going, but at least I knew I wouldn't be in any more pain. I welcomed the warmth with open arms, beckoning the end.

I was vaguely aware of the deafening pops that followed. I wouldn't have known anything had happened at all if the rending pain hadn't ceased, replaced with the warm, wet, stinky feeling of thick demon blood splattering down onto me and mixing with my own. My vision had fled, but I could hear the shrieks of pain as more pops followed. I tried to move, to get to my feet, but I had no feeling in my legs. I didn't even know if I still had legs. I could hear someone running up towards me, their breathing heavy.

"I don't know what's going on here, man," Oblitrix said between breaths. "But this is seriously crazy."

"You don't even know the half of it," I tried to say.

My mouth must have been in rough shape because it came out as little more than a mumbled gurgle. Bullets, I realized. He had shot them. I needed to heal fast, or we were both screwed. I focused my will inward, forcing the impossible to happen even faster. My vision returned in a blink, and I could see Oblitrix leaning over me, a sheen of sweat on his forehead, a Desert Eagle in his hand, aimed in the direction of the demons.

I opened and closed my mouth to see that it was working, clenched and unclenched my fists and toes. He watched me with disgusted, frightened fascination.

"Those bullets aren't going to keep them down long," I said, jumping to my feet. I was surprised to see the demons still on the ground, hunched over on hands and knees.

"Silver," Oblitrix said. "I've been doing some digging since I made that video, figured I ought to come prepared. I wasn't expecting *this* . You looked like a mincemeat pie thirty seconds ago."

"I have a good health plan," I replied, bending down and picking up my sword.

I could see the silver had slowed them, but it wasn't going to stop them. I didn't waste any time, walking over to the first and bringing my blade down on its neck.

Sensing their fate, the remaining two demons reared up. I took a step back to defend myself, but needn't have bothered. Two more loud pops, two more silver bullet holes, and they were back on the ground. I stabbed both of them through the back, this time taking pleasure in the killing strokes. I began to turn to face Oblitrix when I noticed the black cloud forming around them.

"What the hell is that?" Oblitrix asked.

Their souls, I knew, but I didn't tell him. Josette had never told me how to keep them away, and now I could feel the darkness trying to find its way into my body. The cloud began swirling around me, rising up towards my face as its vortex increased velocity. I tried to close my mouth to it, but the black cloud began slipping into my nose and sliding down into me. I dropped to my knees and closed my eyes, focusing inward again to find the encroaching mass of demonic energy. It was going to overtake me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"No," I said.

I was quiet and calm while I focused my will against the cloud as I hard as I knew how. I felt the tug and the feedback of the command blasting against my mind, imploding at the same time it exploded. The black cloud vaporized instantly, leaving me standing there shaking from the pushback. The pressure was so tight around my head that I thought it would burst, my vision went dark again, and I passed out.

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In the dream, I was back at the Statue of Liberty, standing on the small walkway that encircled the torch. I wasn't alone. His long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, his eyes covered by a pair of aviator shades. His expression was smug.

"Where were you two minutes ago?" I asked him. "I could have used you."

"You mean I could have used you," he replied. He smiled, revealing a mouth full of razor pointed teeth. "Sorry man, but I won't kill my own kind."

The whole thing was weird. I knew I was dreaming, or hallucinating, or something. It felt real enough. The air was cold and crisp, the wind whistling through the metal structure of the Statue. I could even hear tourists clanging up and down the steps nearby. At the same time, there was this otherness to it. Something was just off. I couldn't place it, but I could feel it. That, and the fact that the Great Were I had killed was here, laughing at me.

"I don't suppose you know what this is?" I asked him.

He seemed pretty comfortable with the situation. I felt

surprisingly comfortable with him. I knew he couldn't harm me here.

"I can't believe you killed me and captured my soul," he said with a sigh. "This is you. Your subconscious, your REM state, whatever the hell you want to call it. Divine spend hundreds of years trying to get to this place. You don't even know what it is."

He started laughing again, louder and stronger.

"Why?" I asked.

He stopped laughing and looked at me. "What do you mean why?"

"Why do Divine spend years trying to get into their subconscious?" I repeated. It doesn't seem that great in here, present company included."

"Man, you don't know anything. This is the source of all of your power." He waved his hand around at the world. "You trapped me here with it, even though you had no idea what you were doing. I was trying to take your body for my own. You fought like crap, got me because I was too busy ogling that little white honey. I thought it would be easy. Let me just say, you're a blast to hang out with though. Those two girls were smokin'. And that angel... A little young for me, and her face is nothing to write home about, but damn she knew what to do with that sword of hers."

He was baiting me, and I knew it. With a thought, I pushed him back against the railing, shoving him back until he was teetering over it.

"I know what you're doing," I said.

He laughed again. "Do you? Look around, Landon. Look at the scope of your power. You have the whole world at your disposal. I'm trying to help you realize your true potential. We could have Reyzl licking your feet within an hour."

I hesitated. Just long enough for him to catch my weakness and seize on it.

"How many times have you been beaten up already?" he asked. "Aren't you getting sick of it? You have the power, and I know how to use it. We can co-exist, and you can have anything you desire." His face turned to a perverted sneer. "Like that angel of yours. Sexy little thing like that, I bet she knows quite a few tricks after seven hundred years."

I'd had enough. My moment of weakness was replaced with pure anger. I gave the equivalent of a flick with my mind, and the Great

Were went flying off the torch. I watched him fall, getting no satisfaction when his body slammed into the ground below and dissolved.

His words reverberated through me. The whole world at my disposal. There was a seductiveness to the thought. Wasn't that the idea? If the demon couldn't overpower me physically, he was going to try to do it mentally. The fact that I was affected by his words at all was proof that no matter the scope of my power, I was only as strong as my will. I remembered Dante's last words to me. "Survive and fight." It was simple, straightforward, and easy to remember. Somehow I had been surviving. It was time to start fighting. I turned towards the torch, where the Great Were was perched once more.

"Ulnyx," I called. He raised his eyebrows in surprise at hearing his name. "I'll see you around."

I flipped him the bird, and woke myself up.

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11

I hadn't expected to find myself lying in a hospital bed. I wasn't even really human! There was nothing any doctor could do to help me. There was no one to help me except myself.

Oblitrix was sitting in a chair next to me, his feet up on the bed I was lying in, an iPad resting on his thighs. He didn't even notice that I was awake. I felt a draft, and grimaced. They had changed me into one of those lousy robes, and stuck an IV into my arm. I grabbed it and pulled it out, then morphed the robe into something more suitable. That got his attention.

"Hey man, you're awake," he said, dropping his feet and standing up.

"I've got to get out of here," I told him, tossing aside the blankets and sliding out of the bed.

He put his arms up to block me. "Hold on man, you can't just waltz out of here like that."

"Why not?" I asked.

He pointed at the window. "For one, NYPD is out there. They want to talk to you real bad."

I followed his finger. There was a pair of detectives hanging outside the room. They hadn't noticed me yet, and they wouldn't. I focused my will, altering the room to look undisturbed to anyone outside of it. I couldn't see the illusion, but the tug in my mind told me it had taken.

"What do they want to talk to me about?" I asked.

He looked at me like I was crazy. "You don't know?"

"Would I have asked if I did?" I replied. "I've been a little indisposed to keep up with current events."

He laughed. "True enough. I don't know what was happening to you man, but you caused an earthquake when you dropped. Took out two of the tunnels."

An earthquake? I had thought the pressure was internal. "Was anybody hurt?"

"No, " he said, "but the cops think it was a terrorist attack or something. They already questioned me. They just want to talk to you, see if you know or saw anything."

"Is that how I ended up here?" I didn't even know how long I had been out. By the fact that Oblitrix was still hanging around, it couldn't have been too long.

He nodded. "Yup. I didn't want to just leave you like that, especially after what I saw you do. I hung around and made sure nothing else from my nightmares popped up until the cops showed. Good thing I have a permit. I told them I didn't know what had happened, but I was trying to protect you."

I looked at Oblitrix and tilted my head. After what he had seen, he could have just kept running in the tunnel and left me to be destroyed. Not only had he come back, but he had stayed with me when I was most vulnerable.

"Thank you," I said. "You didn't have to come back."

He laughed again. "I don't care who or what you are, nobody deserves to get eaten by whatever those were. You're the one who sent me the PM, aren't you? The screen name looked familiar, but from what I hear that guy died like six months ago."

"Yeah, that was me," I admitted. "Death didn't work out so well." I held out my hand. "Landon Hamilton."

He didn't hesitate to grab my hand and give it a firm shake. "Obi-Wan Sampson," he said. "Most people just call me Obi."

"Obi-wan?"

He sighed. "Yeah. My folks were huge Star Wars fans, the classic

trilogy anyway. I'm just glad they didn't name me Jar Jar."

"So am I," I said. "You're a crack shot with that hand cannon of yours."

"I did four years in the Corps," he said. "Two in the field, two behind a computer. I still work out every day, and hit the range at least once a week. Once a Marine, always a Marine. Semper Fi, you know."

"I'm impressed, and super glad to meet you," I said. "If you want to stick around, I'd love to chat some more, but right now I've got to get out of here before they try to come in."

He looked back at the detectives. "Alright man. I'll distract them so you can slip past. The elevator is down the hall to the-"

I went over to the window and flung it open.

"There's bound to be a Starbucks nearby," I said. "Meet me there."

I was on the third floor. Not too high to jump, so I did. I focused my will on the air below me as I fell, feeling it give to my demands. It became denser, heavier, slowing me down as though I were falling through mud. I landed almost gently and looked up to where Obi was hanging out the window. I gave him a thumbs up and headed down the street, thoroughly impressed with myself.

I changed my appearance and circled back around to the front of the hospital, getting out front just as Obi pushed his way through the large glass doors. I let him walk by, then trailed close behind him as he headed away from the building. It wasn't that I didn't trust him. Okay, it was that I didn't trust him. Divinity was making me paranoid, and I didn't have any confidence that his bravery wasn't one huge setup. I didn't see any downside to being extra cautious.

He rounded the corner ahead of me, and I followed a good twenty feet behind, mixed in with a few other pedestrians who were headed in the same general direction. When I turned the corner I could see the Starbucks sign dead ahead. What I didn't see was Obi.

I sensed the danger before I saw it, and reacted immediately. I ducked to the left to avoid a strong right hook, then reached out and twisted his other hand away before he could get a shot off with his gun. I pulled us both off to the side of the pavement to get clear of the bystanders, who hadn't even noticed the attack. I was going to drop my disguise, to show him it was me, but he had already relaxed his guard.

“What’s up, Landon,” he said. “Nice moves.”

“What was that all about?” I asked him. “How did you know it was me?”

He dropped his gun back into the messenger bag. “I knew it was you when I left the hospital. You started tailing me, so I decided to jump you. Figured if you were hostile you would kill me, otherwise you’d trust me.”

“You do know I’m throwing an illusion, a glamour?” I said. “You aren’t supposed to recognize me.”

He laughed. “Sorry man, I only see you. There’s this weird haze around you, almost like looking through some foggy glass, but that’s it. Hey, do you think you could tell me what all of this is about?”

I was hesitant to let him get involved. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“This is the most action I’ve had since Afghanistan,’ he replied. “Computers are fun toys, but nothing compared to an adrenaline high.”

“Come on,” I said, leading him towards the Starbucks. “I’ve got a craving for an Americano.”

I put us in the corner, out of earshot of all but the most adept listeners. Obi opened his bag and pulled out a manila folder, then sat down.

“Why don’t you tell me what you already know, and I’ll try to fill in the blanks,” I said.

He handed the folder over to me. I opened it up, and was greeted with a photo of two vampires, fangs and claws extended, looking as if they were about to tear each other apart.

“A still from the video,” he said. “I was walking home from work; I’m a backend developer for a startup. Anyway, I hear this commotion in the alley, and being the nosy-ass son of a bitch I am, I make my way down with my cell phone camera running. That’s what I saw.”

I flipped past the photo to a print out of a message board thread.

“What is this?” I asked.

“After I saw those guys go at it, I hit the internet in search of information about real vampires,” he said. “What you saw on SamChan was just the tip of the iceberg, I didn’t expect much from that collection of miscreants... no offense.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “None taken.”

“Cool. So I started digging a bit more, hitting up some Tor sites, looking for a lead into illegal blood trade. I figured if these guys are real, they’ve got to eat. If they’ve got to eat, there’s bound to be suppliers. That’s my pay dirt.”

I looked at the printout again. Everything was written in code.

“You cracked this?” I asked.

“Yeah man,” he said. “That wasn’t easy though. They’re using a lexical encryption based on Romanian, circa six hundred A.D. Figures right? Anyway, it took me close to ten hours to find a reference to the language, another four to crack it. In a nutshell, it’s a blood exchange. The most twisted market you could imagine - with a premium for two things.”

He stopped talking and started tapping his fingers on the table.

“You’re going to make me guess?” I asked.

He nodded. I thought about it for a couple of minutes while he waited.

“Angels, and young girls?”

He slapped his hand on the table. “Close; angels, and *virgin* young girls. It was the angel part that got me going. I mean, vampires and angels? So I followed the trail a little further.”

I flipped past all of the prints of Romanian cryptography, and my breath caught in my throat. She looked like she was looking right at the camera. Josette.

“You know her?” he asked me.

I knew my expression was giving me away.

“We’ve met,” I said.

“She’s an angel,” he said. “From what I can gather, she’s worth quite a bit of coin to capture alive. I’m guessing they think she’s the best of both worlds.”

She was an angel, and a virgin. In seven hundred years, had she never found love? Or was it forbidden for angels to get involved in those kinds of relationships. I hoped it was the latter. The thought of her spending all of those years alone saddened me.

“How did you find her?” I asked.

“The vampires are tracking her for a guy named Reyzl,” he replied. “They have all kinds of spotters trying to keep their eyes on her. She still manages to fall off their radar from time to time, but she always turns up again. When I took the pic, she was working at a soup kitchen down in Chelsea. You can see the entrance in the background. Anyway, the homeless I talked to seemed to know her,

so I guess she works there pretty regularly."

I fought back a sudden bout of embarrassment. I had been under the impression that angels kept the balance by hunting demons. It had never occurred to me that they would take on such mundane tasks as manning the line at a shelter. Then there was Reyzl. He seemed to be involved in everything around here, and not in a good way. I took note of the sign on the building, 'Holy Trinity'. I should have guessed.

"What do you know about Reyzl?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not much man. The vamps seem like they're afraid to even type his name."

He sat back and took a sip of his Quad Caramel Latte with Extra Caramel. If vampires ran on blood, I imagined Obi ran on sugar.

"Your turn," he said.

Until he said it, I had never considered how I would explain myself to a mortal. He knew what vampires were, and he knew angels existed, so that was a good start. I gulped my Americano and took a deep breath.

"So you have angels, and you have demons," I said. "And then you have me. I'm kind of a Divine mutt, the only one my kind."

I told him everything I knew, using much the same description that Dante had used with me. Obi was stoic through it all, not reacting to anything I said, but analyzing every word. When I was finished, he just sat there for a minute, then licked his lips and reached for his bag.

"Silver won't work on me," I told him.

He didn't say anything. I watched while he opened the messenger bag, pulled out the Desert Eagle, and handed it to me, butt first.

"Knights used to pledge their swords," he said. "I don't have a sword."

I didn't take it right away. I looked into his eyes. He looked back, unflinching. I could see the strength in him, the conviction. If I was going to champion mankind, he was going to squire, and nothing I said or did was going to change his mind. I reached out and took the offered handle.

"You're probably going to be dead within a week," I told him.

His laugh was loud. "You have a strange way of welcoming people, man."

He reached out and clapped me on the shoulder. I discreetly

handed the gun back to him.

"So what's next?" he asked me.

I picked up the folder. "I need to find out what the demons know about the Chalice Jesus drank from at the Last Supper, the Holy Grail. They've begun using it to make themselves near invincible."

I had just told him that the Holy Grail was real. I might as well have told him his shoe was untied. He was all business.

"That's heavy stuff,' he said. "I think I can help you out there. There's a vampire named Merov. He's a big deal in that circle, one of the largest suppliers on the exchange. He's having a big party tonight at his penthouse. From what I gather, its his daughter's eighty fourth birthday."

That sounded promising. "You have an address?" I asked.

"I wouldn't have mentioned it if I didn't," he replied.

I swallowed the last of my Americano and stood up. "Let's go," I said. "I'd say we could stop by your place, but I'm going to venture to guess it's been trashed by now. Was there anything on your computer that might give them a clue you know about this party?"

"Unencrypted?" he asked, offended.

I smiled. "Right. Then we'll go back to my place. Maybe you could teach me to fight."

It was good to have a friend, for as long as he lasted. I had a feeling the lifespan of mortal Purgatorian sympathizers was pretty short.

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“Man, you need a serious upgrade.”

Obi looked around my apartment. It was the third or fourth time he had commented on my lousy living conditions.

“It suits my needs,” I told him. “It’s not like I get social security or anything. I’ve got about three thousand dollars to last me the rest of eternity, or until a die, whichever comes first. I’ll take bets on which one it’ll be.”

“Come on man, I saw you. I don’t think anything can keep you down.”

“If I lose my head, I die. If I take enough damage, I could be thrown in a safe somewhere and buried for all time. I won’t die, but I’ll be trapped.”

I hadn’t thought about that scenario before. I had to fight back a wave of panic. With any luck, the other players wouldn’t think about that one either.

Obi’s voice snapped me out of my macabre introspective. “So you said you wanted to learn to fight. How much do you know?”

“You saw me,” I said. “How much do you think I know?”

“Good point. Lucky for you, I served as an assistant instructor for my squad while we were in Afghanistan. I’ll whip you into shape in no time.”

I wanted to go up to the roof, but Obi protested due to the cold. I had already forgotten that he wasn’t immune to the elements. I led us over to the room across the hall instead, pushing the furniture out of the way so we would have some room to maneuver.

The second we had finished clearing the floor he started barking at me Marine style, ordering me to drop and give him fifty. Just to make a point, I pumped out two hundred, asked him to sit on me, and did one hundred more. It didn’t take too much effort for me to make myself a little stronger, and I had already found that my physical endurance was pretty much limitless.

“Point made she-hulk,” Obi said, hopping off of me. “I’ll show you some mixed martial arts moves instead.”

He had me stand next to him and mimic his movements. He was a natural teacher, his manner and pace easy to follow and understand. Within a couple of hours, I was able to deflect his most aggressive advances. I wasn’t as successful on offense, having to pull my punches so I wouldn’t hurt him. He seemed pleased with the results though.

“Best grub I’ve trained,” he told me. “Hit the shower private, the party starts in three hours, and you need to get uptown.”

I took another shower, and then sat with Obi to go over the plan. It was pretty basic, but the best we could do with the limited information we had. I would go in alone, disguised as a vampire and hoping that nobody there could see through the glamour. I would talk up the guests a bit, using some of the code words Obi taught me so I could intelligently make reference to the trade. The goal would be to try to coerce the guests into talking, or otherwise overhear anything that could be related to the Chalice.

As an aside, I also intended to listen for any chatter regarding Josette. There was no way I was going to let her wind up as some rich vampire’s tasty snack. Once I had gotten what I needed, or decided I had overstayed my welcome, I would duck back out and return to the Belmont to debrief General Kenobi.

At the same time that I was attending the soiree, Obi would be working the Internet some more, trying to land info about the Chalice. Now that he knew what he was up against, he knew well enough to stay on the move and hop hotspots.

“I wish I was feeling confident about this,” I said to Obi.

The party started in half an hour, which was just enough time to be fashionably late. I hadn’t vamped myself out yet, but I had changed my clothes into a super sharp black tuxedo with a Nehru jacket and gaudy diamond cufflinks. We decided I should go as a major player, and being able to look the part would help me integrate and get them talking.

Regardless, I was doing battle with the feeling of being over exposed. It didn’t help that I had lost possession of the blessed sword back at Grand Central. What would happen to it now? Would some homeless guy just happen by and find himself in possession of an incredibly sharp and deadly demon-killing tool?

“I’ve been pulped three times already, and I won’t have backup,” I said.

Well, I guess I did have backup if Ulnyx decided to make himself available. After the not-dream I had experienced I was feeling a little bit better about being able to control that bastard, but he knew I could control him too, which made his participation iffy.

“Don’t worry about it, man,” Obi said. “All you have to do is keep the disguise going, and you won’t have any trouble. Just channel your inner James Bond.”

Obi’s overconfidence was a great counter to my apprehension. I walked over to the door and swung it open.

“Wish me luck,” I said, trying to keep my nerves in check.

Obi laughed. “Nah. Good hunting!” He gave me a stiff salute as I shut the door behind me.

The party was taking place in the penthouse of a Trump property on the Upper East Side, a ritzy glitzy area where celebrity sightings were sure to be more common than vampire sightings. It was at the total end of the island from where I was starting, but the distance wasn’t a problem. Obi had called a livery while I had showered, and a confused limo driver greeted me when I exited the Belmont.

“Are you okay?” I asked him as he pulled the back door of the stretch limo open for me.

This was costing ten percent of my stash, but Obi had insisted I needed to go all in to earn their trust. He had even gone so far as to plant some messages about ‘Stefano Giovanni’ across the online blood exchanges, hushed whispers of a reclusive trafficker who had decided at the last minute to fly in from Venice to attend the

birthday bash. He was sure there were no other major players in Venice; it seemed vampires weren't big fans of water, and my ability to operate there would also gain me some respect.

The limo driver looked from me, to the Belmont, and then back. I had changed my appearance, going for more of a Brad Pitt, *Interview With a Vampire* look, complete with a set of small fangs that would only be apparent if I smiled fully.

"No sir," he said. He ushered me in and closed the door. "Frickin' drug dealers," I heard him mutter. "Just drive 'em up, drop 'em off, get the hell outta there."

The limo ride was short, but I took the opportunity to enjoy it. I hadn't been in a limo since my high school prom. Carly Lane. The name made me shake my head and smile at the same time. I hadn't thought about her in years. I was her first crush, an awkward computer nerd who looked at women and saw only distraction. She had asked me to the Prom, and against my better judgment, I had accepted. It had never occurred to me then, but she had been really pretty. What would she say if she could see me now? The date hadn't gone so well, but we had stayed friends for the remainder of High School. I bet she was married and had a few kids. She always had been the motherly type.

The driver's voice snapped me out of my reminiscing. "Here you are sir," he said as the limo glided to a halt.

I turned my head to look out the window while I waited for him to come around and get the door. The building was huge, at least fifty stories or more, all glass and steel. It just oozed power and money. There was a doorman waiting by the huge revolving door, and just inside I could see about half a dozen vampires standing in a line. My heart leaped to my throat as the slide into panic started. If they were able to see through my glamour, I would be dead before I got across the street. I was beginning to regret my current course of action. The door opened.

I took one more deep breath and stepped out of the limo. I handed the driver the cash plus a generous tip.

"Thank you," I said.

He was halfway to the driver's seat before the "you" made it out of my mouth. My senses were getting a little crazy with the number of Divine gathering in the building. I could feel the combined energy of the masses. It didn't help my nerves any.

I slipped through the revolving door and was approached by the

first vampire in the line. He was well-dressed, well kept, and well-built, equal parts class and muscle.

"I'm here for the Solen birthday party," I said, trying to stay calm even though my chest felt like it was about to give birth to something nasty. "My name is Stefano Giovanni."

The vampire took his time looking me over, but it was his nose I was worried about. I had done my best to mimic the smell that I associated with Rebecca because she was the only good example I had of how a vampire should smell. I had toned down the floweriness of her perfume, but maintained the musky iron and mixed it with Drakkar.

I waited; internally tense enough to break a board, externally playing it cool. He completed his sniff test, took a step back and smiled, his fangs betraying him for the first time.

"Mr. Solen has directed me to cater to your every whim," he said. "He is very eager to speak with you regarding the Italian markets. This way, Mr. Giovanni."

He bowed and put out his arm to direct me to the elevator. I didn't look at him, or respond. I just started walking like the stuck up evil prick I was supposed to be.

We stepped into the elevator, and he hit the only button in it. Private. Impressive.

"What's your name?" I asked. My voice sounded normal to me, but I was projecting it to him with a soft Italian accent.

"Tarly, sir," he replied.

He waited for me to speak again. I decided against it, leaving him to deal with the awkward moment. The elevator had us up to the penthouse in no time.

Obi had warned me about what to expect at a vampire-organized event. Even so, it was a challenge to hide my reaction as the elevator doors slid open and Tarly and I stepped out into the apartment.

The living space was huge, bigger than anything I could have imagined. The elevator let out on a large balcony that overlooked the main living area, where I could see about a hundred guests had already gathered. To the right were the rest of the smaller rooms, to the left and front nothing but a wall of twenty-foot tall floor-to-ceiling windows that exposed an incredible view of the city. The balcony fed down into the party through a pair of matching marble staircases, which were lined with a menagerie of antiques that I was

sure cost a fortune. The front corner by the windows held a more typical interior decoration, with a sofa and loveseat caddy cornered in front of a free-standing fireplace, enabling their inhabitants to get the best view of the city below. Hanging from the ceiling over the furniture was a huge canvas banner that read ‘Happy Birthday Reyka!’.

All of this was impressive, but not out of place for the rich. What gave the affair away as being oh-so-not-normal was the open area that had been created by removing a bunch of the ancillary furniture. Sitting in the middle of it was a huge classic Roman fountain, but instead of spouting water it was circulating blood, tossing it up into the air and dribbling it over the sides into the main pool. The guests around it would dip a finger in from time to time to get a quick taste, and then resume whatever conversation they were having. It was gross, but not completely stomach churning as long as you tried not to think of where the blood had come from.

That prize went to the fringe of the open area, near the southern wall of glass, where they had set up about half a dozen beds. On the beds were women, human women, unclothed, tied up, and drugged. They weren’t alone on the beds, the guests were free to step right up and have a taste.

I was nearing the breaking point of my ability to contain my disgust, repulsion, and anger when Tarly stepped in front of me.

“Mr. Giovanni,” he said.

I must have given him a look of death because he stooped over and looked up at me like a beaten animal.

“I’m sorry sir, but Mr. Solen requested that I bring you over to him. If you’ll follow me?”

Making a scene about the ‘Fresh Fleshette’, as Obi had told me the vamps called it, would have blown my disguise in about point oh one seconds. As much as it pained me to have to ignore it, failing to find the Chalice was going to cost a heck of a lot more.

“Lead the way,” I said, maintaining the assertive posture that was causing Tarly to stoop like Quasimodo.

He straightened up, but not too much, and started walking down the southern staircase. Great, now I had to get even closer to it.

Closer would have been a bonus. As it turned out, Merov Solen was just finishing up with a taste of his own. There was nothing frightening or imposing about the vampire who was considered the

most powerful in the Americas. He was small, maybe a couple of inches over five feet, with a bald head and a plentiful gut. His eyes were large and blue, his clothes a simple pair of corduroys and a plaid button-down shirt that made him conspicuously out of place amidst the rest of the partygoers in their black ties and gowns.

When he saw me approaching, he gave me a car salesman smile, and then licked away a bit of blood that had coagulated in the corner of his mouth. I glanced over at the girl on the bed. At least she had no idea where she was or what was happening to her. If I had a chance to get her out, I would. If not, I would avenge her somehow.

"Care for a small bite?" he asked. "There's nothing quite like a virgin to get the old heart pumping again, is there?"

I bit my tongue, almost hard enough to get a taste of my own blood. "Personally, I prefer pure. I find the alterations caused by external agents unpalatable."

Merov smiled and reached his arm up to put it around my shoulder. "A demon of exquisite taste and standards. I respect that. Between you and me, I wouldn't have even bothered with the drugs, but this is my daughter's birthday party and she's going to be mad enough at me for providing the Fresh Fleshette at all. Sometimes I don't know if she's really mine, the way she carries on about drinking human blood. We're vampires for Hell's sake!"

A vampiress after my own heart. I felt an instant unknown kinship with Merov's daughter. We were both in a vast minority after all.

"Is she here?" I asked him. "I'm most interested in learning more about her ideas for survival without our primary food source."

He laughed. "Do you have any idea how much of my money she's sunk into researching vampire physiology, trying to figure out exactly what's in human blood that we need to survive? She's even had me try some of her sample synthetics. You could live on it, but it tastes like sewage. And that's ignoring the fact that such a thing would put me out of business. Can you believe I'm financing my own destruction?"

He started leading me through the throng, acknowledging all of the guests who noticed him. When they saw him coming, they would turn, fall to one knee, and bow their head.

"Besides," he continued, "humans are meant to be cattle to us. We're superior in every way, am I right?"

I wanted to crush his melon head between my hands. “Right,” I said instead.

“Anyway, she hasn’t shown up yet. She doesn’t know about the party, so I’m hopeful that she’ll respect her father’s wishes for once. She’s a handful, but she’s my only child, and I love her as much as my cold heart will allow.”

He was taking me past the gathering, towards the more private living spaces on the northern end of the apartment.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said. “I have never had a desire for offspring.”

He nodded at the two burly guards as he brought me past them and into a long hallway. Looking at them as I passed, I realized they weren’t vampires. I felt a small stirring in my soul. Weres.

“I didn’t either,” Merov said. “Reyka’s mother was a Succubus. She tricked me into it. At first, I was so angry I almost had her killed. Then, I decided to wait until my little girl was born. I was curious about what kind of demon the union would produce. After I saw her, I claimed her as my own, and removed her mother’s head myself. I think that’s where she gets her soft spot for humans. Her mother always had a thing for them. She said they were most creative.”

Merov stopped at a set of double-doors near the end of the long hallway, then fumbled around in his pants pockets, looking for the keys.

“Anyway, enough about my daughter. If you’d like, I can introduce you when she arrives. What I’d really like to speak with you about is my interest in working out a trade agreement. I have a number of parties interested in getting their fangs on a good European source. My servants have told me you have quite a reputation, and that you are a mystery to most.”

“I try to keep a low profile,” I agreed. “The element of surprise can be quite powerful.”

He finally found what he was looking for, a small coin that he pressed against a flat panel attached to one of the doors. It beeped, and the door unlocked.

“That’s how I came to power here,” he said. “This apartment used to belong to another, before I claimed it and threw him from the roof. But not before I took this.”

He held up the small coin. It wasn’t a coin after all, but a round piece of glass with the edge of a finger nestled inside. He needed

the prior inhabitant's fingerprint to get into the room.

He was about to push the door open when one of the were guards stepped up to us. "Pardon me sirs," he said. He sounded like he was chewing on gravel. "Mr. Solen, your daughter has arrived."

Merov sighed. "Perfect timing as usual," he said, turning to me. "We will talk again later, after the party."

It wasn't a suggestion, but a command. He didn't wait for me to react. He turned and started walking back towards the elevators, leaving me standing there with the were. He ushered me back to the party.

When I stepped back out into the main reception area, I looked up to try to catch a glimpse of Merov's daughter Reyka. I could see Merov making his way up the steps, but the angle was no good to see more than a few feet past the landing. Oh well, I could wait. Merov had said he would introduce us. I moved into the crowd, focusing my attention on the conversations swirling around me.

"It's just ridiculous," one of the vampires was saying to a group of five or six. "The market is just flooded with poor quality. Every vampire who has ever hunted is trying to start their own exchange service, and they think that we can't tell the difference between a debutante and a prostitute."

"Give me an angel any day," his companion said. She looked like she was fifty or sixty years old, but solid as a rock. "I still remember the last time I had an angel. It cost me a fortune, but it was so worth it."

"I heard the Masters have a new weapon in the war," said a third. This one got my attention. "Some kind of amulet that makes the wearer completely indestructible."

The others expressed their shock and awe. "Where did they get it from?" asked the older vampire woman.

I didn't get to hear the response. An immediate hush fell over the whole crowd, and they turned as one to face the landing. I was the odd man out, not catching on to whatever invisible signal had been sent. I turned to look just as they all shouted, "Surprise!"

It sure was a surprise. Reyka was Rebecca.

She was stunning in a perfect little black dress and black pumps, her long black hair piled up on top of her head. The contrast of all of the black against her white skin accentuated everything about her perfect form, and it almost drove me to the point of distraction. I could tell by her reaction that she was less than pleased with the

surprise. Not that any of the other attendees would have noticed because she was an expert at faking the enthusiasm. I knew she was lying though, as she laughed and gave her father a big hug.

He turned her and faced her back out to the gathering below, and they applauded her. Stealing glances, I saw the feeling was mutual. The crowd wasn't cheering for Rebecca. They were cheering because Merov expected them to cheer. To them, Rebecca was every bit the outcast she had explained herself to be. I could guess why she had given me an alternate name.

After a satisfactory length of applause, Merov raised his hand to quiet the gathering. Once he had achieved silence, he took Rebecca by the hands and spoke to her loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"My dearest daughter," he said. "Every year as this day comes I am so very grateful that you were brought into my world. Your smile is the blood on which I thrive."

Merov motioned with his head, and Tarly stepped over, holding a small gilded box. Merov let go of his daughter's hands and took the box from the servant, holding it out to her and opening it. I couldn't see the contents, so I watched her reaction instead - surprise, confusion, and a hint of disgust? Those were her real feelings. To her father, she showed only joy.

Merov reached into the box with one hand and withdrew a long silver necklace, at the end of which hung a crystal. It looked red from the distance, but I knew the crystal was clear. The red came from the blood trapped inside. Just for confirmation, I reached into my tuxedo pocket and withdrew the business end of the necklace I had taken from Ulnyx. It was a near perfect match.

"May you always stay safe from harm," he said as he placed it over her head. "Happy birthday dear."

The applause started up again, and I could almost feel Rebecca cringing at the pomp of it all. She turned and waved at the crowd, holding up the crystal for them all to get a better look at her gift. That was when I felt her eyes meet mine, and my heart fell out of my chest. She recognized me.

I had an option to either be bold or submissive. I went for bold, keeping my eyes locked on hers, letting them tell her that I knew that she knew it was me. I saw a slight smile crease the corner of her lip, so I winked at her. She winked back, then turned and gave her father a big hug. They talked privately for a minute, and then started down the steps. On the way, Rebecca not-too-subtly pointed

at me and asked him who I was. I gave them my best bow.

"Stefan," Merov said as he reached the bottom of the stairs, Rebecca on his arm. "I'd like you to meet my daughter, Reyka."

Rebecca unhooked herself and held her hand forward. I dropped to my knee and kissed it, dizzied by the smell of her.

"A pleasure," I said as I rose back to somewhat shaky feet. She was smiling, a beautiful, honest smile. She really was happy to see me.

"Sir Giovanni," she said with a hint of playfulness. "You are too kind."

"Nonsense," Merov said. "You are always a pleasure my dear. If you don't mind, I have some other people I need to speak with. Stefan, take good care of my daughter." Again with the command.

"As you wish, Sir Solen," I replied. Merov leaned up to kiss Rebecca on the cheek, and then wandered off to speak with some of the other guests. "What's with that?" I whispered to her as soon as he was out of range.

She leaned in close so we could speak without being overheard. Her proximity was intoxicating. Half-succubus, I remembered. "He's trying to Command you," she said. "He doesn't know you're resistant to demonic possession."

There went the half-succubus excuse. She was giving me heart palpitations on her own merit. It had to be the perfume.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Do you know what will happen if anyone figures out who or what you are?"

"Your necklace," I said.

She looked down at it. "What about it?"

"That's what I'm doing here. I'd tell you more, but you aren't on my side. Needless to say, it's worth the risk to me. Finding you here is an unexpected bonus."

I hadn't intended to say the last part out loud, but it found its way through my lips of its own accord. Rebecca's face flushed.

"Your father was very eager to have us meet," I said, loud enough for those nearby to hear. I didn't want anyone to suspect we already knew one another.

"My father is trying to find me a suitable mate," she said. There went my heart again, right into my throat. "He knows none of the meat around here can control me."

"Nor should they seek to," I told her. "He was telling me of the research you are conducting. Perhaps these lesser nosferatu find the

idea uninspired, but I think it is a fascinating endeavor." I could tell she was trying not to laugh at my faux snobbishness.

She sighed a sigh that could launch a thousand ships. "You have no idea how refreshing it is to speak to someone with vision, Sir Giovanni."

I could feel the sets of eyes on me, trying to figure out who the fruitcake that thought not killing humans for food was. Our conversation was momentarily interrupted when the elevator opened again, and a human band rushed out, set up their instruments on the landing, and began playing.

"I hate when he does that," she said to me. I assumed Merov had Commanded the band to come and play, and they had literally jumped at the opportunity.

"Shall we Miss Solen?" I asked, holding out my arm to lead her to where a makeshift dance floor was opening around the fountain.

She reached out and took it, the warmth of her touch sending a hot shiver down my entire arm. My prom date with Carly hadn't been a total waste.

I don't know what the song was, or even if there was music. When Rebecca looked at me, all I could see was her face. When she spoke, all I could hear was her voice. She hadn't affected me like this the last time we met, but maybe I had been too afraid to take full notice of her. We moved with such fluid grace it was like we were destined to be dance partners. Her closeness felt so natural, so perfect.

"How did you know who I was as soon as you saw me?" I asked her. The dance had afforded us the opportunity to get super close, and the music aided in drowning out any possibility of being overheard.

"Your glamour doesn't work on me," she replied. "Didn't the Outcast tell you not all demons could be tricked?"

"Because of your mother? I seem to be doing okay with the rest of the room."

"My father told you about her?" She seemed surprised. "He must like you."

I spun her around and expertly regained the step, leading her forward without hesitation. "He likes who he thinks I am, a big shot Lord from Venice. You know what he did to your mother?"

I felt her grip tighten on me, threatening to break my skin. "I know," she said, the anger obvious in her voice. "He's never tried to

keep it a secret. He's quite proud of himself. Once a succubus has you, it's very difficult to escape."

"And..."

"And what? He's my father. I am obligated to either obey or overthrow. There is no middle ground."

"Overthrow?" I knew what the word meant. I knew what it sounded like. It was just weird to hear someone say it about their family.

Rebecca's iron grip relaxed. "A vampire can rightfully seize control of their house by disposing of the patriarch. It is the normal means by which we rise and fall from power. Until that time, we are bound by our honor to show respect, even to those we despise. I am powerful for a vampire because of my mixed heritage, but I am not strong enough to defeat Merov Solen, and so I've had to endure his story of how he murdered my mother for much of my life."

"He seems to care for you," I said. At least he had claimed he did.

"In his own way," she admitted. "He has provided me with everything I have ever asked for, anything I could ever want. But there are strings. Always strings."

I could see the sadness in her eyes, and I wanted nothing more than to be able to help her. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

She gave me a look of strange fascination, and then she kissed me.

It was a short, soft kiss, but it sent a wave of energy rolling from my head all the way down to my toes. I could feel the tips of her fangs brush up against my lip, the sharp edges threatening to puncture the skin. I could taste the cold moisture of her mouth, blood and iron and lipstick. My entire body turned to jello.

"Thank you," she said in a hoarse whisper. She pulled back and helped me resume the dance. My rubbery legs fought to comply.

We finished out the song in silence, our hands and eyes staying locked together. My mission. I hadn't come here to flirt with the birthday girl, regardless of how much I was enjoying it. I was here to get information about the source of the very thing that Merov had gifted to his daughter. It was only logical to think that Merov knew the origin. My mind went back to the room with the fingerprint lock. I was willing to bet anything that the answers I sought could be found in that room. The real question was how in the world was I going to get inside? The answer - I wasn't; at least

not tonight. I needed to beat a hasty retreat while the going was still good.

"Thank you for the dance, Lady Solen," I said to Rebecca in my Sir Giovanni voice while letting go of her hands. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go downstairs to make a phone call. I would be honored if you would offer me the opportunity to speak with you further about your scientific achievements. I believe they are most fascinating."

Rebecca smiled. "Perhaps we can continue the conversation after you complete your call," she said. "I can escort you down to the lobby."

"You are very kind," I replied, holding out my arm for her again.

She wrapped her own arm in it and started walking me towards the stairs as the band began playing another tune. I glanced around the crowd looking for Merov, finding him back at the Fresh Fleshette. He noticed me with Rebecca on my arm and smiled his approval. I could imagine what he'd be thinking if he knew what I was intending to do.

"Leaving so soon?" Rebecca whispered to me as we ascended the stairs to the elevator. "You couldn't possibly have gotten what you were looking for from me."

"I got something better from you," I replied, causing her another round of embarrassment. "What I was looking for, I got from your father, although he doesn't know it yet."

We reached the top of the stairs and stepped out onto the landing. It was clear except for the band and another pair of weres who were guarding the elevator. I had almost made it out without a negative incident.

"Sir Giovanni needs to go make a call," Rebecca told the guards. "I'm going to escort him down."

The were on the left held up his hand. "Just one minute Lady Solen. The elevator is on its way up. You'll never believe who decided to come to your party."

I looked at Rebecca. She shrugged her shoulders. "Who is it?" she asked.

The timing was impeccable. The elevator dinged, the door slid open, and out of it stepped pure evil.

Reyzl. I knew it was him the moment the elevator doors finished opening. He was resplendent in crisp, fitted tails, complete with top hat, gloves, cane, and fur lined cape. He was dark skinned, Indian

maybe, tall and bony with boyish good looks. The kicker was the eyes, huge solid black orbs that absorbed your soul, stole your will, and reflected you back as no more than a puppet on a string. They were empty, expressionless eyes, creepy and powerful and impossible to penetrate. He radiated total domination in the form of an unfeeling coldness that left no question that was the superior. It was the power of pure hate, greed, and evil resting just below the surface of the human facade he had wrapped himself up in for the occasion. It was my first glimpse at what a true demon was, and the hopelessness that followed was almost enough to crush my soul right then and there.

He knew me too, or at least he knew who I wasn't. He was emotionless as he stepped off the elevator and looked at me for the first time. I saw nothing in his eyes, but his lip curled at the edge in a rough snarl. He lifted the hand with the cane towards me, and every muscle in my body froze stiff as if I had been encased in ice.

"Diuscrucis," he said with a perfect, flat calm as if he had been expecting the encounter.

I struggled against myself, trying to will my body into motion. I could feel the tug in my mind, could feel my power butting up against his. It was no contest. "This is going to be quite an entertaining night after all, isn't it," he said to no one in particular. "Merov," he called out.

I continued fighting the invisible bonds, even though I knew I wasn't strong enough to break them. Rebecca had backed away from me towards Reyzl when he had called me out. I didn't blame her for choosing his side. I was a mouse with my tail firmly caught. I couldn't turn my head to look, but I could hear Merov Solen running up the steps to answer to his master.

"My Lord Reyzl," Merov said, reaching the landing and dropping to his knee.

Reyzl didn't even look at him. He just raised his cane and motioned towards the guests below. Merov got back to his feet and went to the edge of the platform.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried out to the assembly. The band stopped playing, and the quiet din of so many conversations all hushed at once. "All hail the power and glory of Lord Reyzl the Dominator," he said, turning and dropping to his knee again.

Everyone else followed suit, including Rebecca, who looked at me as she did so, her eyes apologetic. I would have told her I

understood, that it was okay, but I was the one still standing, stiff as a board and one hundred percent incapacitated.

Reyzl motioned for Merov to stand, which was the queue for the rest of the congregation to follow. They stood motionless, waiting for their master's command. "Now Merov, will you please explain to me how you allowed a diuscrucis into your home unchallenged."

Merov turned to look at me. "Sir Giovanni?" he asked. "I... I'm sorry my Lord. I do not understand."

"Do you question me?" Reyzl asked, his voice still calm and emotionless.

Merov's face turned bright red. "No, no my Lord," he replied, bowing down to the demon. "I cannot see what you see. I see only a vampire. He told me his name was Stefan Giovanni, from Venice."

I noticed the minutest change in Reyzl's expression. It was as if his body had attempted to feel mirth, but it had been crushed in an instant.

"Of course," he said. "Reyka, my dear. Tell me, what do you see?"

She didn't hesitate, and I understood why not. "He is a diuscrucis, my lord. His name is Landon. I have been befriending him, in order to learn his secrets, to learn what the Outcast and his servant are plotting."

As she spoke, her pale blue eyes were replaced with the same cold black orbs that I had seen the first time we met. They were expressionless eyes, used to hide from me. I had expected her to identify what I was, but I hadn't been expecting her complete betrayal. If I could have moved, I would have kicked myself for being so stupid. She didn't need to possess me with the power of a succubus. Her natural beauty had been more than enough to seduce me into trusting her.

Reyzl fixed his attention back on me. The only way I knew it was because he said my name. "Landon. I'm going to ask you a question. You'll need to be able to speak to answer it." I felt my head regain mobility.

It was tempting to say something stupid and pointless, but it would have looked panicked and weak. I was both, but I wasn't about to let him have the satisfaction of forcing it out of me. I said nothing, waiting for his question.

"No doubt the Outcast and his Collector have sent you on this fool's errand. Tell me, are they aware of the Chalice and the work

we have being doing with it?"

He stepped closer to me as he spoke, his mere presence overpowering my senses. He was Commanding me, I knew, though he was much more subtle about it than Merov had been. Worse, it was a struggle to resist compliance.

"No," I said. "I was here to find out about the Exchange. To find a way to shut it down." I figured I'd try, but I had no doubt he would be able to see right through the lie.

"Reyka, is he telling the truth?" he asked.

"He wouldn't tell me what his goal in being here was, my Lord," she told him.

At least I had done something right, not telling her everything. He seemed to be going for the lie.

"No matter," he said. "No harm has been done. Goodbye, Landon."

He showed no outward sign of effort in causing every single nerve in my body to feel as though it were exploding at once. The agony of the event was indescribable, like a paper cut on every single cell that made up my living flesh. As each cut was made my body would heal in time to be cut again, multiplying the sensory pain a hundredfold. I would have passed out, would have welcomed it in fact, but my Divine being wouldn't allow it. I experienced a hundred lifetimes of pain each instant, all the while knowing it was just a prelude to my final fate.

I kept my eyes as focused as I could on Reyzl as he stepped forward, lifting the cane and pulling from its base with his free hand. The cane doubled as a sword, a cursed blade that would put me out of my misery. The demon's expression didn't change the entire time. It was lifeless, soulless. Not even my tortured pain was able to cause any sort of reaction. The complete ambivalence was the most frightening thing of all.

Before he could finish me off, the entire world erupted into a mess of chaos and frenzy. Reyzl's perfect ensemble was ruined when a clean silver blade burst from his heart, the blessed runes etched on its surface glowing red with heat. I felt the pain stop, felt my limbs regain their flexibility. I stumbled and fought to stay on my feet.

I heard Merov shouting his daughter's name, and then I saw her charging me, her eyes still black, her fangs bared. I couldn't recover fast enough to defend myself. She slammed into me, lifting me over

her shoulder. With one motion she planted her foot on the top of the railing and carried us both off of the landing and down into the waiting crowd below.

We hit the ground hard, the momentum tossing me away from her. I had gone from bad to just as bad, because now I was lying in the middle of over a hundred angry vampires.

I leapt to my feet, getting into position to defend myself the way Obi had shown me earlier. Rebecca had regained her footing as well, coming at me from my left. I turned to defend myself from her when I saw a brown shape hurtling down from the landing above. She crouched low and kicked up with her foot, making a solid connection with the incoming missile, sending it careening off into the crowd. I stood there dumbstruck. The missile had been Merov.

"Move it, worm," she said, reaching out and grabbing my arm. "I'm trying to save your life."

The pain of her grip snapped me out of it, and my brain did the math. She had stabbed Reyzl from behind with a blessed dagger. Where she had gotten it, I had no idea, but she had saved my life for the moment at least. Her betrayal had been a ruse. She had chosen a side, and it was mine. The sum of that equation was the hardest kick in the ass I could have imagined.

I looked up at the landing, where Reyzl was working to get the dagger out of his chest. I was going to assume if Ulnyx had possessed an amulet, his boss would have one too. That meant we had about twenty seconds to find a way out of this mess, maybe less. The guests had overcome their surprise and were turning towards us, their eyes going black, their fingernails and fangs elongating. I looked around the room in search of something, anything I could use. My eyes settled on the fountain of blood.

Blood, water, they weren't that different, and I had practiced making it rain for hours. I reached out and focused my will, pulling the fluid from the fountain and yanking it over to where Rebecca and I were standing. It splashed through the crowd in its haste to arrive, and then circled around and spread over us like a plasma cocoon.

"I don't see how this is going to help," Rebecca said in response to my activity.

The blood was spinning around us, maintaining the form. I had turned water vapor into water. Now I took liquid blood and dried it into a solid.

“This is just part one,” I said. Part two was going to be the hard part, and I didn’t know if I would be able to pull it off. “Keep them off me if they get through.”

I closed my eyes, picturing the twenty-foot walls of glass that occupied the outer corners of the penthouse. I focused my will on them, demanding that they lose their cohesion, that the crystalline structure of the glass break down at a vastly accelerated pace. I could hear the claws scraping against the wall of blood. I could hear Merov shouting from outside, cursing Rebecca for her betrayal. I didn’t dare open my eyes for fear of losing my focus. I pushed again, as hard as I ever had before.

There was no build up, no warning. I could hear the groaning, cracking, and then the shattering as the glass succumbed to my will. One moment the windows were whole and perfect, the next they were imploding in a million fragments. The cries of pain from outside the blood sarcophagus were deafening. Nothing inside the apartment was able to avoid being pelted with shards of glass. Nothing except for Rebecca and I, encased in a protective shell. It wouldn’t be enough to kill any of the vampires, but with any luck it would slow them down long enough for us to escape.

“Part three,” I cried, opening my eyes and turning the blood barrier back to liquid.

It splashed onto the floor, and the true chaos of what I had created was revealed. All around us the gathered vampires writhed in pain on the floor, each having suffered at least a hundred cuts and piercings. They were healing already, but the pure volume of the damage was keeping their attention off of us. I took a quick look back towards Reyzl. As one of the few bodies on the upper floor, he had been pin cushioned by the incoming glass. He was healing faster than the others, and I could tell by the position of his head that he was watching me when I took Rebecca by the hand and started to run towards the now open windows.

“Are you out of your mind,” Rebecca shouted at me as we approached the exposed Manhattan skyline, a good fifty stories up. I just might be.

I pulled her in close to me and pushed off with my legs as hard as I could, putting us airborne even before we had reached the edge. I didn’t know if I would be able to go through with it once I could see the drop, so I didn’t give myself the chance. The floor of the penthouse disappeared, and then we were flying high over the

quiet city street below. I took a deep breath and held it as my stomach lurched. Our flight was over, and now we were falling.

Rebecca's grip was painful as we plummeted towards the concrete under us. I had about seven seconds to slow us down enough to both survive the impact and heal before any of the demons above regrouped and came down in the elevator. I could only hope Reyzl wouldn't follow us in the express.

I forced my will on the air around us, demanding it to be denser, thicker, heavier, and to provide a greater level of friction and resistance in order to slow our fall. I could feel it responding around us, feel the pressure building and thickening. Not enough. The ground was still approaching at a breakneck pace.

I demanded it to compress even more, the pressure threatening to pop us from the inside. Rebecca's eyelids were raised in fear, though her black eyes told me nothing. I was going to say something comforting, but there was no time. I rolled myself so I was positioned under her just before we hit the ground.

The second we made contact with the earth I let go of our airbag, the release of the compressed air causing a small explosion that shattered the windows of the buildings around us and flipped over a couple of parked cars. We hit hard, but not too hard, and I knew when I felt my back shatter that the damage wouldn't be bad enough to prevent us from moving soon.

I still held Rebecca on top of me, clutching her body against mine. I had broken her fall, but she hadn't escaped unscathed. Her legs had been askew from my own, and her kneecaps had taken the same force as my back. She was alive and alert though, her eyes open and back to their perfect pale blue. Her face was twisted in pain.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Nothing that won't heal," she said through her grimace, "But I can't do it as quickly as you."

I could feel my body was already mending. I maintained my grip on her as I pushed myself to my feet, lifting her up and over my shoulder. "Then allow me, Miss Solen," I said. Direction didn't matter, as long as it was away.

We had gone up about two blocks when we heard the roar of the first demons out onto the street.

"Put me down, Landon," Rebecca said.

I lowered her to the ground, being careful not to put too much

stress on her knees. She pointed to a manhole cover near the end of the street. The sewer? Maybe I could turn off my sense of smell.

"We won't be able to lose them down there," she said, "but it will give us a better defensive position." She didn't wait for me to argue. She kicked off her heels and ran down the street. I followed behind her. She pulled the manhole cover off and began descending into the darkness.

It was pitch black underground, but I knew by now that it didn't have to be. I adjusted my eyes to be able to pierce the darkness, being met with stone walls and a six inch deep stream of who-knows-what. The smell was horrible, but not unbearable. I moved to put the cover back over the manhole, but Rebecca pulled me away.

"No time," she said, pulling me behind her.

We heard the splash when the weres hit the sewer. There wasn't enough room for them to maintain their demonic forms down here, something I hadn't considered but Rebecca must have. We could hear their footfalls as they chased behind us, moving just as fast as we were.

"We need to take them out, or they'll just catch us when we try to climb up," Rebecca said, coming to a stop and turning around. She reached over her shoulder and pulled another dagger from a sheathe hidden on her back.

"You can't kill them with that," I pointed out. The dagger was cursed.

"No," she agreed. "I'll slow them down, you stop them."

I didn't have a blessed weapon either. "How?" I asked. "I'm unarmed."

She smiled. "Landon, you're a diuscrucis. You're always armed. Be creative."

Her eyes turned black again as she morphed into killer-vampiress mode and dashed forward towards the oncoming weres. I could see that she intended to hit them when they turned the corner. Be creative, right. I heard a grunt of pain as the battle was joined, Rebecca's element of surprise giving her a clear advantage. Be creative. I looked down at the sewage running past my legs. It was my turn to smile.

When I reached the corner where Rebecca had vanished, she was having her way with the weres, her dagger lashing out like an angry viper to add to an ever growing number of cuts while they

struggled to make contact with their own weapons. I recognized them as the two that had been guarding the elevator when Reyzl had made his entrance. It made sense that they would be the first ones down.

"Whenever you're ready," Rebecca said, ducking under a strike and stabbing one of the weres in the chest.

I focused my will on the sewage at my feet, finding a pair of splintered boards and pulling them out of the flotsam. I held them aloft, moving them back behind my head and down the tunnel as far as I could. I didn't want to take any chances that I wouldn't get enough momentum.

"Down," I yelled, pushing the huge splinters forward with all of the force I could manage. I could feel I was reaching the limits of my strength, and my head was enveloped in pain as I sent the missiles hurtling towards the fray.

Rebecca danced out of the path of the makeshift spears just in time. The weres weren't so lucky. They had just enough time to identify the threat before they were skewered, the twin wooden stakes piercing all the way through their chests, hearts, and backs. They both emitted an ear-splitting howl and toppled forward into the muck. I leaned up against the side of the sewer. My head was on fire, and I was having trouble seeing straight.

Rebecca pounced on the prone weres and used the cursed dagger to remove their heads, then hurried over to where I was leaning.

"Too much," I told her. "I need to rest."

"Don't get too embarrassed," she said.

Before I could ask her what she meant, she had me over her shoulder, carrying me through the sewer like a child. I wanted to protest, but I was just too weak. I let her be my legs without complaint.

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She put me down once we had neared the end of the sewer tunnel, which opened up into a larger area where multiple flows met and continued on in a single stream. We could hear voices through the large tunnel up ahead, a cacophony of sound that suggested more than just a wayward vagrant.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said, the ground still a little shaky under me.

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “Can you walk?”

My head was still throbbing, but I could hold myself up. “Yeah, but I really need to rest for a while. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“The glass was impressive, but lets try not to have to jump like that again,” she said. “There are humans up ahead, a squatter settlement I believe. We can rest there.”

“What about Reyzl?”

“He won’t give chase, and Merov’s people will turn back once they see the headless henchmen. We’ve won for tonight. Reyzl is nothing if not patient.”

“So he knows he can take me out pretty much any time and isn’t concerned?”

She giggled. “Something like that.”

“I don’t know why you decided to help me, but I’m glad you did,” I told her, looking into her eyes. She dug her fangs into her bottom lip and gave me a sheepish smile.

“Just something about you I guess,” she replied. “Come on.”

We didn’t have to walk too far down the larger adjoining sewer tunnel before it opened up into a much larger room. My guess was that it had been a pumping station many, many years ago.

There was a massive hunk of machinery resting just off to the side of the river of sewage, with old brass pipes jutting out and down into the muck. A shantytown had sprung up around it, home to at least three hundred people and complete with electricity and lighting provided by a hack on the pump’s former connection to the grid. They even had clean water that they were leeching from a pipe that must have once been used to cool the giant beast.

The town itself was a loose grid of tents, tarps, and cardboard boxes molded together into workable living spaces for the homeless who resided here. They were going about their lives oblivious to the strangers in their midst, collecting water from the open pipe to cook their food on propane heaters, or to clean their clothes in makeshift washtubs. What did they have to fear since they had nothing to lose?

I leaned on Rebecca while we walked, thankful to have her shoulder to keep me from falling over. I could only imagine being one of the vagrants seeing us go by, me in my torn up tuxedo that I was too weak to fix, Rebecca in her ragged black dress. We must have looked as if we had just stepped out of an explosion, fitting because we sort of had.

We split the center of the encampment, looking for a place to sit and rest for a while. The people around us did their best to pretend we didn’t exist, even going so far as to turn away when we approached. It was ironic to me that the homeless were shunning us. Were they doing it to show us how others made them feel? I looked at Rebecca, who seemed unfazed by the community’s reaction. Was she used to it, or did she just not care?

“I see you demon. I welcome you.” The voice came from behind.

Rebecca and I turned as one to see who had called her out. A girl. A small girl, no more than ten years old, with a thin, frail

frame, and shoulder length reddish blonde hair. She was wearing sneakers with a simple flowered dress; both surprisingly clean considering the amount of grime that covered everything else down here. That wasn't the most amazing thing about her though. Her eye sockets were barren, the skin sinking into them. She was blind. Blind, and Divine. I don't know why neither of us had known she was near. The feeling I got from her was different, unique. She was not a demon, or an angel.

"Do you address me child?" Rebecca asked. If she was surprised that a blind girl could see her, she didn't show it.

The girl stepped forward, stopping a few feet away. She definitely knew right where we were standing.

"I address both of you," she replied. She turned her head towards me. "Welcome, brother. My name is Sarah. Come sit with me. I can see that you are tired."

The other people around us had ignored the exchange, and they hurried to move out of the way of the little girl leading us towards the center of the encampment. There was an old man resting there, in front of a larger nylon tent. He looked more like your stereotypical vagrant, with a long white beard and layers of jackets and sweaters covering a rail thin body. He looked up at us when we passed but said nothing.

The inside of the tent was sparsely decorated, a thin air mattress in the corner, a small shelf with a few random books on it, and a stack of boxed and canned food and drink. The center of the tent had a bunch of old blankets and rugs piled on top of it, creating a somewhat comfortable cushioning to sit on. Sarah beckoned us to do so, taking position right in front of us, close enough to touch.

"Welcome to my home," she said. "Please find peace and shelter here."

"Thank you," I said. The whole thing seemed surreal, and in my exhausted state I wasn't positive it was happening. "Who are you?"

"I am Sarah," the girl replied, laughing. "The question you should be asking is, why are you. Why are you, Landon?"

I was taken off guard by the question, and the fact that Sarah knew my name. How did she know? How could she see me? Why am I? It was something I hadn't ever thought about. Even after dying and being returned to this world, I had never considered why I existed, why I had come back. I had agreed to it because I felt I had to, but why? It was so easy to ask, so hard to answer. "I don't

know," I admitted. "Why are you?"

She smiled. "Few of us know why," she said. "Yet without knowing why we are, how can we ever know who we are? That is the secret to control, to power. The demons use it. The angels use it. They don't want you to think about it. You don't need to know to be Awake. You just need to question. Everyone here questions."

The homeless people outside. All of them could see what we were. "Is that why they turn away?"

"There are three, brother, always three. One, those who do not know they are being controlled, who live their happy, oblivious lives. Two, those who know and accept control in exchange for something else. Three, those who know and reject control, who always ask why and become outcasts to society. See them, for they are the true casualties. They are caught in the war and cannot fight. They see the war and cannot end it. They lose their families, their jobs, their homes because they question why. The Sleeping call them crazy because they do not accept."

"I don't want to control them," I said. "I want to help them."

Sarah nodded. "Yes. I know that you believe it brother, but you are young."

"Why do you call me brother?"

"That is part of who you are," she replied, "but just a part. You will need to learn why before you can be whole."

"You are a half-breed," Rebecca said, her voice and expression filled with excitement. "A first generation offspring of an angel and a demon, a true living diuscrucis. Such a thing was thought to have ended thousands of years ago." She turned to face me. "A direct offspring of such a union has command of much of the power you do," she explained. "But in order for a demon and an angel to pair, they must bind their child to this world such that the soul is conceived inside a mortal shell. Thus bound, she is limited by the fragility of mortality."

"What about when she dies?" I asked.

"I will have the same fate as all mortals," Sarah said. "I will be judged by my actions as all others are."

"If she is to return to this world in any form, her power will fully develop. That is the reason that such unions are forbidden."

"It is doubtful that I will ever be allowed to return," Sarah said.

The flap of the tent drew back, and the old man stepped inside. He looked at us, then at Sarah. She patted the floor next to her, and

he went to sit by her side.

“I should never have been,” she said. “But there is no greater temptation to true evil than the forbidden. My father is a demon of great strength. He captured my mother, locked her up as his prisoner, drugged her and took her purity.”

She spoke of such horror without emotion; her eyeless face a mask. “He impregnated her because he wanted to see a half-breed for himself. When I was born, he murdered her in the delivery bed, and took my eyes so that I might never know who he was. For six months, he had me raised as his own, to see if a diuscrucis could be made pure evil. He didn’t know I could see him, could feel his heart that he had worked so hard to cloak in darkness. He would have destroyed me if he had discovered that I could see the Divine without my eyes, and know them even without knowing their exact form.

She motioned to the old man sitting next to her. “Izak was my mother’s jailer, and he spent much time with her. He secretly fell in love with her, and then with me. He discovered first that I could See, and so he stole me from under my father’s nose and has hidden me ever since. He is the one who has taught me of our kind.”

“And your father?” I asked. I could make a guess who would do such a thing.

“I do not know,” she replied. “It is not the demon Reyzl as you think, brother. Izak will not tell me his name, but he assures me that is not so.”

It was a little creepy how she knew what I was thinking. I turned to Izak. “Why won’t you tell her?” I asked. “You claim to love her.”

Izak looked at me and said nothing. I was beginning to get angry when Sarah raised her hand between Izak and me.

“Hold your anger. Izak seeks to protect me from him. Even thinking his name could reveal me, and I am not yet ready to confront him.”

“How did you wind up down here?” Rebecca asked. Sarah’s story had brought tears to her eyes, which she now wiped away with the back of her hand.

“After Izak took me away from my father, we traveled for many months. He taught me of the world, of its beauty, and of how to see it without my eyes. I was in wonder of it all, and still am. In time, we came to this place, hidden from the rest of the world so that he

could teach me of my power. Nobody lived here then, it was just Izak and I. I found that I could See not just the Divine, but also the Awake. Those who could see me, I could See back. I felt their anger, their pain, and their hopelessness. We began to bring them here, to give them a community."

"Aren't you afraid your father will find you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "None of these people will betray me. I can not give them their former lives back, but I have helped them make new ones down here, with others who understand."

She turned her head towards me, and this time I could feel her entering my thoughts. I was still tired, still weak. I pushed her out with as little force as I could manage, for fear I would not be able to stay conscious with any greater effort. She did not resist. Instead, she giggled out loud.

"I am glad to have found you, brother," she said. "Rest now demons. Find peace and shelter here."

I had so many questions, so much more I wanted to know. I didn't get to ask them because she had both Calmed and Commanded me. I knew now how to recognize each, and I panicked at the thought of what she would do once I was out. I fought against her power, but I was too tired, too weak.

"Do not fear," she said to me, right before the world went dark.

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I was only out for a few seconds. When I woke, I was sitting on my bed at the Belmont, naked and coated in a sheen of sweat. Ulnyx was sitting across from me, behind a piano, his fingers tickling the ivories. When he saw me, he started laughing.

"Be quiet, Ulnyx," a familiar voice said.

The demon quieted and placed his hands in his lap. I looked over to the door. Sarah was standing there, looking the same as she had before she put me to sleep, except... Different. It was her eyes. They were whole in this place, an incredible reddish gold that shimmered and danced like Josette's.

"I'm sorry, brother," she said to me. "You were weak, and you will need to be strong to carry on with your purpose."

"How can you be here?" I asked her, clothing myself in a simple black t-shirt and sweats before she could see me.

"You invited me," she replied.

"How?"

Sarah giggled again. "You called to me, and I came. There is so much you still have so little control over. Like him." She jerked her

head towards Ulnyx. “You have trapped his soul, yet he refuses to do your bidding when it does not suit him.”

“I can’t make him,” I said.

“No? Ulnyx, stand up,” she Commanded. He kicked out the piano bench and stood. “This is your Source brother. If you cannot rule here, you will continue to fail.”

Continue to fail? I looked at the Were. His expression was contained, a mixture of surprise and anger. The way he had jumped at her Command. This was my dream, my world, and yet she had more power in it than I did. The thought drove me to anger.

“How do I learn control, when there is no one to teach me?” I asked, my voice almost a snarl.

“You do not need to learn, all you must do is ask why. Why are you?” She hadn’t reacted at all to my outburst. She remained calm, unaffected.

“I don’t know,” I said. Why were any of us? According to Dante, we were just pieces in a puzzle that did not fit, figures in a game with no end.

“The game cannot continue if you do not play.” Sarah hopped over to me and looked up into my eyes. “Why are you?” she asked again.

I looked from Ulnyx to her, and back. Continue to fail... His static posture was a representation of every failure I had experienced since Mr. Ross had left me on Lady Liberty. Yeah, I was still alive, but I had remained that way because of dumb luck. Every scrape I had been in had resulted in somebody intervening to save my sorry ass. Even now Sarah was here, showing me how powerless I truly was. Ulnyx had been right. I was pathetic.

“I don’t know,” I growled, the feeling of hopelessness spreading from the inside out.

“This world is your Source, brother,” Sarah said, maintaining her perfect calm. “Its oceans are boundless, its mountains endless. Would you be a flea or a titan? Why are you?”

“I don’t know. How did you find me?” I was losing control of myself. Every word she spoke increased my anger, my frustration, and my despair.

“I didn’t find you,” she said. “You found me.”

It was yet another statement that made no sense. I hadn’t been looking for her. How could I have been looking for her? “I wasn’t looking for you,” I yelled.

“And yet you found me. Why were you looking?” she asked, calm, emotionless, serene. I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I wasn’t,” I shouted, willing her out of my mind. She cried out in pain and was gone. The anger did not subside as easily. I could feel it permeating the entire world around me, staining everything with its pallid darkness. I turned to Ulnyx.

“You! Where the hell were you when I needed you?”

The Great Were looked at me but didn’t make a sound. I walked over to him and lifted him into the air by the throat. He didn’t react.

“Why am I?” I asked, shaking him. “Why am I?”

His lips split in a mocking grin. Even in my fury, I could not make him obey.

I held him aloft, my fingers sinking deeper and deeper into his throat. Everything around me was black, the room quivering and oozing as I stained my Source with my anger, my evil intent. It was more than just Ulnyx. I wanted to destroy, to ruin, to end. Why had I been chosen to be reborn, when all I could accomplish was failure?

The Belmont crumbled away, and I found myself standing in a wasteland, a world desiccated by my will. The realization was a ten-ton anvil, stealing all of the anger from my soul and slamming me over the head into an instant state of calm. I dropped the Were and took a step back. All at once, the world reversed itself, snapping back to its original state.

Why was I? It was such a simple question with such an elusive, simple answer. The question was a trick, a misdirection, and a lie. It didn’t matter why I was. Asking the question was more important than answering it, the point was that I made the effort to know and understand. To recognize who I was, and what I could become.

Sarah had brought me to anger to show me. No, I had brought Sarah here to show myself. I was of good, and of evil, and my power was a strange concoction of both. How could I hope to truly control any of it if I refused to accept equal parts? Everything rotated in balance, and I was no exception.

As I resolved the truth within myself, I could feel the power wash over me, a wave of energy that soaked into me like water, like blood. It came from nowhere, and everywhere. It had not been created, but released. It was my Source, it ran from my soul, and for better or worse, it was answering my call.

I looked over at Ulnyx, still kneeling on the floor, still wearing his crap-eating grin.

“Get up,” I said.

I could feel the charge in the air as if it had just been ionized by a lightning strike. The smile faded from his face.

“Get up,” I repeated, my voice calm.

He didn’t look like he wanted to, but he rose to his feet.

“If I call on your power, you will provide it,” I told him.

His eyes burned with hatred, but he nodded.

What had I been looking for? Understanding - of myself foremost. Who better to help me understand than one who lived as I had died? It seemed crazy to think that I could have intended to wind up down in the sewers, taking a direct path to what was the world’s only directly descended half-angel, half-demon. It seemed insane that in the entire world she was in the same city, always so close by. Yet so many things could have happened to me. So many choices made that could have brought me somewhere else, led me in another direction, or pulled me off this course.

Maybe what seemed crazy wasn’t so crazy after all. Could I say for sure that I hadn’t been looking for her, that my soul hadn’t brought me here? Dante had said that in order to come into my full power, I had to let go of what I knew as a human and accept what I had become. My Source was a reflection of the world and my place in it. I would create, destroy, love, hate, and most of all survive, because my Source, my soul demanded balance. It was why I was. The question may have been a trick, but that didn’t mean it had no answer.

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I woke with a start, my eyes flicking open to look at the apex of the tent above me. I felt something pressing into my shoulder, turned my head, and found Sarah there, her head resting on my arm, and her body curled into a tight little ball. I remembered what I had done to her in my Source and felt a sudden wave of guilt wash over me. I reached over with my other hand and stroked her head.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. She was asleep.

"Landon." I turned my head to the other side. Rebecca had snuck up on me and was leaning over me with her hand on my other shoulder. How did she do that? "Are you okay?"

It was a good question. I took a deep breath, turned my attention inward on myself. I felt good, really good. I was ready to accept myself in equal parts. Not all good, not all bad. Just me.

"Yeah," I replied. I looked back at Sarah, "How long?"

"Two days. Sarah hasn't left your side the entire time, but I think she's been having some pretty rough dreams. She was crying in her sleep." I looked back to Rebecca and noticed she had changed. She was wearing a pair of camouflage cargo pants and a

tight black thermal henley. Her hair was tied back into a single ponytail. She looked like she was ready for war.

"We need to go," I said.

Rebecca smiled, showing off her fangs, and moved around to help me untangle myself from Sarah. Before she could touch her, the girl woke up.

"Landon," she said, her voice so much smaller and childish than I had remembered it. She pushed herself into a kneeling position next to me. "You are leaving."

"I have to go," I told her.

"Stay," she Commanded. I could feel the power of her word and her mind pulling at my will.

"No," I said, both with my mouth and in my mind. I had thought my rejection would upset her, but she smiled.

"You must continue your journey," she said. "You have found what you were looking for, and for that I am glad. Do not feel sorry for the way you handled me, it was what you needed to do." She had known what I was thinking, and pre-empted my second apology. "I will be thinking of you, brother, and wishing the best for you."

I wasn't ready to just leave her like that. "Sarah, Rebecca told me you were having dreams."

She stiffened up, the change in her demeanor almost imperceptible. "Sometimes I dream of what came before Izak saved me," she lied. "I am thankful to have a brother to protect me. When you can, I hope you will return to visit."

Protect her? From her father? Understanding myself was one thing. Defending anybody from a major demon was something totally different. I wasn't about to argue that with her though.

"I will," I said. I sat up, leaned forward and wrapped her in a tight hug. "Thank you." I had found what I had been looking for, but it wouldn't have been possible without her help.

I released her from the embrace and got to my feet, then reached out and took Rebecca's hand, surprising her with my boldness.

"We've got work to do," I told her.

As we headed out the door of the tent, I noticed Izak sitting motionless in the corner near the food stores, just watching. I gave him a small wave that he didn't return, and then we were gone.

The inhabitants of the small community paid us no more

attention on the way out as they had on the way in, turning away as we neared and staying occupied until we had passed. We slipped out of the sewer through a small access tunnel further south, catching up as we followed it towards our hopeful exodus from the underground.

"I hope you don't mind," Rebecca said as we walked. "I picked your pocket and stole some money so I could get some new clothes."

"You got one of the Awake to sell you those?" I motioned to the militant outfit. "You look like you're ready to join the Army. I wouldn't call it stealing since I would have given it to you."

"I had to give the money to Izak. This is what he brought back for me."

"He spoke to you?"

"No. I told him what I needed, he held out his hand, I gave him some money, and he brought this back. It's better than that beat up dress."

I took a look at myself. I hadn't been strong enough to fix myself up earlier, and hadn't thought of it before now. I was still wearing the penguin suit, as shredded and bloodied as it was. I pushed, and watched it change into a matching outfit.

"It's fitting I guess," I said. "Our own little army."

"Two against infinity," she said with a humorless laugh.

"Three," I replied.

I hadn't thought about Obi until now. I wondered if he knew what had happened. I could imagine the word had hit the forums, and he was no doubt keeping a sharp lookout for any reported sightings of either of us. It was strange to have so much faith in him, despite our short acquaintance. I told Rebecca about how we had met, and then since she had thrown her entire life away to save me, I told her about everything else too, from Ulnyx, to the Demon Queen, to the Chalice. I got the feeling she was a little jealous when I told her about Josette, but she didn't say anything to confirm my theory.

"So what about you?" I asked her.

We had stopped below a manhole, finishing our conversation before climbing back into the world above. We stood facing one another, close enough that her sweet scent kept wafting across my senses.

"What about me?"

“You told me that you were obligated to obey your father, but you helped me anyway.”

“I told you that we had a choice to obey or to challenge.”

“I thought you couldn’t defeat your father.”

She looked down at the ground. “I can’t,” she said.

I reached out and put my hand under her chin, lifting her face. “Rebecca.” Tears ran from her eyes as she looked at me. ‘Why would you do that?”

“Like I said, there’s just something about you.” She was lying.

“You can’t lie to me Rebecca,” I said, wiping away some of the tears with my thumb.

She took my hand in hers, squeezed it, and pushed it away. “No, I suppose I can’t,” she replied. “That doesn’t mean I have to tell you anything, and you don’t have the power to Command.”

Wait a second. “I don’t?”

“Sarah does, because she’s first-generation,” she explained. “You don’t have any direct control over the Divine because you aren’t a direct descendent. You may be able to control the Were, but that’s because you’ve already captured his soul.”

“Oh.” Not that I would have used it on her, except maybe to prevent her from throwing her life away for me. “How long?”

“I already sent him the challenge while you were asleep,” she said. “Tomorrow night at the Statue.”

I could feel the growing lump in my throat. It seemed like I was destined not to have many friends for very long.

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

She wiped the rest of the tears away herself. “I don’t think there’s anything you can do.”

I had an idea. “Hold on... what about the amulet? He can’t hurt you if you’re wearing it.”

“Landon, you’re sweet. I can’t use the amulet. It would be cheating. If I gave up my honor, I would be no better than any other demon. I don’t believe we have to operate that way to survive, and if you look at the situation my kind is in, it’s the change that I’m fighting for so we can thrive as we deserve. We have a physical and mental superiority to humans, we have a numerical superiority to most other Divine, but we’re relegated to slinking about at night, hiding from daylight, and using the majority of our strength figuring out where and how to get our next meal. For as much as I dislike feeding on humans, I have still done

it, and will again if it means their life or mine. With my research cut off, that seems more and more likely." She reached up and took hold of the ladder. "If I can defeat Merov, I will earn access to everything he has. It will all become mine, and I can continue my work. It's a long shot, but the risk is worth it to me."

"What about Reyzl?" I asked.

"You're going to take care of Reyzl," she said. She winked at me and climbed the ladder, pushing the cover aside with ease.

Take care of Reyzl. Right. I reached inward and touched on Ulnyx's soul. I could feel the power respond to my mental tap. Maybe with the Great Were's help I would stand a chance.

We exited the sewer onto an empty street. It took me a minute to get my bearings, but we weren't too far from the Belmont. It was midday, and the sun was out. I pulled Rebecca into the shadows.

"Can you manage?" I asked.

She reached under her henley and pulled out the amulet. "As long as this thing works, I should be fine," she said. She stepped tentatively out into the sunlight. She squinted her eyes and moved back into the cover of the building. "It's not working," she said. What?

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the necklace I had claimed from Ulnyx. I knew this one worked, I had seen it do its thing. I swapped it with hers. "Try this."

She stepped out into the sunlight again, and then retreated. "No good," she told me.

"I don't get it," I said. "I saw Ulnyx use that one to heal. I know it works." She handed the amulet back to me, and I looked at it in disgust.

"Maybe they don't work on vampires," she suggested. "Let's just try to stay in the shade."

Dante hadn't said anything about there being exceptions to the amulet's usefulness. There had to be something else going on, something we didn't know about. If he came calling again, maybe he would have the answer.

We covered the last few blocks by sticking to the darkness and running across the open sunlight when necessary. Punkmo's eyes bugged out of his head when I held the door for Rebecca to let her into the Hotel. I could feel him ogling her until we had passed the front desk and started up the stairs.

"You must get that all the time," I said to her. "Not that I blame

him, you are beautiful."

She smiled, her pale face adding just a hint of redness. "I'm used to it from mortals, it comes with the territory. It means more coming from you."

"Consider yourself flattered," I replied, stopping and turning to face her. "I thought so the first time I saw you, after you threw me onto the floor of the closet. Of course, I was scared witless of you at the same time, so it was kind of a unique situation. Still..."

I didn't get to finish talking because she wrapped her arms around me and put her lips to mine. I didn't get to kiss her either because at that moment the stairwell door above us slammed open, and Obi came tumbling out. Following right behind him was a demon. It twisted in the air, using its thick leathery wings to balance itself while it planted its claws on the opposite wall to spring downwards towards him. It shrieked through a short, fang-filled snout.

I felt Rebecca tensing to move, and I held out my hand. "I've got this one," I said.

I focused my will and sprang forward, launching up the steps like a rocket, the momentum carrying me over Obi as he turned onto his back with the Desert Eagle raised above his chest. I heard the gunfire and felt the bullet rip through my leg, but I didn't pay it any mind. I reached out with my hand and caught the demon's bald head, slamming the creature down onto the steps, its skull shattering beneath the force. Before it could recover, I twisted and pulled, ripping its head off.

Once it was dead, I recognized the pain the bullet had caused. I looked down at my leg, watching it knit back together, the process slowed by the silver. Then I looked at Obi. He was still sprawled out on the steps, his forehead covered in sweat and his breathing ragged. He gawked at me with huge, relieved eyes.

"Holy crap man, sorry about the leg," he said. "You picked the right time to show up though. There are two more incoming. I shot them in the head, but these assholes don't stay down long."

"How did they find you?" I asked.

He started pulling himself to his feet. "You got me, man. Maybe triangulated the Wi-Fi access points? I thought I had done enough variance, but maybe they have some giant brain demons or something."

"There are no giant brain demons," Rebecca said, reaching down

lifting the muscular ex-marine to a standing position. “The Cthulhu are incredibly intelligent, but they don’t get involved outside of their own affairs.” She smiled, showing Obi her fangs.

He had been giving her the oh-my-god-you’re-so-hot stare before she smiled. The effect was like breaking a spell. I’m sure mortals would see a perfect set of pearly whites until they were being drained at least. I could see his throat move as he swallowed his heart and backed up a few steps.

“What the?” he cried. He started raising the Desert Eagle, but I put my hand over it.

“Obi, this is Rebecca. Rebecca, Obi-Wan. She’s on our side,” I told him.

Rebecca scrunched her face. “Obi-Wan? Like Star Wars?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Man, even vampires make fun of me. My parents,” he said.

I cleared my throat to interrupt them. I could feel the shifting heat of a Hellish mass pressing down on my soul. “Now that the introductions are out of the way, we need to move. Those two you shot either brought friends or called for backup.”

“If you can get to your room, I went back to Grand Central yesterday and got your sword. It was sitting on the tracks.” He looked over at the half-dissolved headless demon. “Not that you seem to need it.”

“I could use it,” Rebecca said. “I don’t have the strength to rip skulls off spines.”

I could feel the demons getting closer. “Okay,” I said. “Obi, stay back and cover us. Try not to shoot me again.”

Rebecca and I hopped up the steps and out into the hallway.

“Do you know what those things are?” I asked.

She nodded. “Standard grunts. Reyzl makes them. They’re all brawn, no brains. They can survive for short times in the daylight, but they’re especially vulnerable to water. Make sure to mind your neck, they can remove your head with one finger.”

She reached down and pulled her dagger from her boot, never breaking stride. Obi stayed ten feet behind, his Eagle aimed between us. I didn’t doubt he was an excellent shot, but I hoped that if he did miss, he would miss to the right. I could take the silver bullet, Rebecca couldn’t.

“He makes them?” I asked. “Get ready.”

The demons came rushing around the corner, spittle flying from

their fangs as they changed direction. They had two more holes in their skulls before Rebecca and I could even move. I grabbed each by the head and twisted, becoming more comfortable with the sickening crack each time I caused it. I looked back at Obi, who just shrugged.

"How many bullets do you have?" I asked him. Silver wasn't cheap and making bullets from it couldn't have been easy.

"About fifty," he said.

"Hold your fire unless it looks like we're in trouble. I have a feeling we'll need those later." We reached the corner, and I pointed to the room down the hall. "My room is down there. Grab the sword, so we can get out of here."

I reached out and felt for the demons. They were coming down the stairwell. I heard breaking glass. They were coming in from the windows too. Rebecca took off for my room at a sprint. I turned around to see a grunt bearing down on Obi from behind. He didn't know it was coming.

"Obi," I shouted. I couldn't reach him in time. Desperate, I focused on the floor right behind him, pulling the nails from the wood and sending them hurtling into the demon. It stumbled backward as a hundred tiny spears checkered its chest. Obi stopped next to me and looked to see what I had done.

"Nice," he said.

The demon recovered in a hurry and began rushing towards us again. I hoped I was as fast a learner as Obi had said I was.

It arrived as a mass of swinging claws, strong, powerful muscles driving me backward while I tried to find a way to maneuver around them. I felt the heat of a wound to my shoulder and another to my leg, but it was nothing that wouldn't heal. It snapped and growled, trying to get to my face with its teeth. I ducked in close enough to smell stale, hot breath, and then slipped around behind it, reached around its neck and twisted my arms, hearing its spine shatter. I was going to remove its head, but three more grunts had filed out into the hallway.

Obi downed one of them but couldn't get a shot off on the other two. I grabbed him and pushed him to the ground to get him out of the way of a set of claws, and then took hold of the monstrous arm and broke it at the elbow. The move would buy us seconds at most.

I heard the snarl of the second demon, and then smiled when a blessed sword severed its head from behind.

“This way,” I said, motioning to the nearest room. “We can take the fire escape to the ground.”

Rebecca took a moment to stab the other two grunts, and then followed us into the empty room. I blew out the glass with a thought.

“This is going from bad to worse,” I said. I could feel the gathered mass of evil growing, their power pushing in on me. It felt like the Belmont was on fire. “I think they’re trying to surround us.”

The building shook from the force of so many monsters moving through the old structure, all converging on our location. Reyzl was using more force than I had expected. I leaned out through the window and looked down. There were more grunts waiting in the alley, covering the exit. I looked up. The roof was clear.

“Up,” I said.

“Up?” Obi asked. “Are you crazy, man?”

I pushed him out onto the fire escape. “Go up sergeant,” I shouted back. He started climbing. “Rebecca, go.”

“You first,” she said.

I shook my head. “Someone needs to cover our escape.”

Rebecca smiled and winked at me. “Escape? You’re leading us further *into* them. Now go!”

I started climbing, hearing the sword thunking into flesh behind me. I doubted the roof was the safest place to be either, but it was open, and I wanted the breathing room. I caught up to Obi, and we dropped over the side of the building onto the roof together. There were already six grunts waiting for us, and three more came up behind Rebecca when she joined us a few seconds later. They didn’t attack right away, choosing instead to surround us. I assumed they were waiting for greater numbers, knowing they had us trapped.

“Now what?” Obi asked, spinning in a circle to keep an eye on all of the demons.

More of the grunts were reaching the rooftop every second, and three weres came up from the stairwell, joining the throng. They cut their way through the hissing demons, coming to a stop in front of me. The largest of them took two more steps forward and spoke.

“Diuscrucis,” the were said. “Master Reyzl demands to meet with you. Come with us, and we’ll let your companions go.” I didn’t need any special power to know he was lying.

“Landon,” Rebecca said, sounding worried, and looking ashen in the sun, “tell me you have a plan. I can’t stay out here like this for

long."

"I have a plan," I replied. Okay, I didn't have a solid plan, but I had one idea. I closed my eyes and reached inward, calling out for Ulnyx. I could feel the Great Were's strength forming in the base of my spine. This time, I could drink from it and stay in control. The power was his, but my mind was my own.

I smiled at the were, my mouth growing, elongating, and filling with razor sharp teeth. I could feel the rest of my body changing as well, shifting form into the monstrosity of skin, muscle, and bone that was Ulnyx's morphed form. I lifted my middle finger and aimed it at the demon, then used it to beckon them towards us. The weres hesitated, torn between the risk of death at my hands or Reyzl's. There was no doubt he wouldn't be pleased if they returned without some piece of me. The grunts weren't smart enough to know any better, and they rushed to close the circle.

I dropped down to all fours and launched myself at the demons; claws ripping and tearing, powerful muscles tossing them aside like matchsticks. There were at least fifty of them squeezing in on us. I grabbed one of the grunts and threw it back at the frightened weres. They moved aside and it disappeared down the open stairwell. While I was watching its path, I noticed the water tower behind the door.

I raked my claws through three more grunts, and then paused to focus on the tower. Even with Ulnyx's massive strength there were just too many of the creatures to deal with this way. I might be able to kill them all in this powerful form, but not without risking Rebecca and Obi.

I let loose a massive roar, feeling the tug in my mind and demanding the water in the tower to set itself free and join me on the roof. I pulled at it, forcing it through the wooden planks that contained it, causing it to geyser out through the weakest seam. The grunts had been frozen by the roar, and now they cried out in agony as the water splashed downward from the sky, soaking everything on the rooftop.

"Damn that's cold," Obi cried. I swung my head around to check on him, and he stumbled backward, away from my gaze.

Rebecca wrapped an arm around him to steady him and winked at me. She looked like crap, the sunlight and the water taking their toll. The grunts behind them were dancing across the rooftop, desperate to shake the water from their bodies. Their skin puckered

and oozed, their life force seeping out from everywhere. Many had already dropped lifeless to the ground, and I was sure the rest would follow.

I heard claws on the blacktop and turned back around in time to see the three weres had made up their minds. They had morphed into their demon forms and were charging towards me, teeth bared. I let out another roar and shot forward to meet them. Blood blossomed from them, and I heard the echoes of gunfire in the sky. The weres stumbled and rolled, coming to a rest right under my feet. I brought up a massive foot and slammed it down on one skull, then another. The third were, the leader, I let live.

I had felt Ulnyx in my mind, his presence a pressure in my skull as he sought for a way to overpower me. I pushed back against him now, kicking him back down into my soul, dismissing his power as if flipping off a light switch. My body began changing, shrinking, returning to my human form. My clothes were rags hanging from my neck, and I pulled them back into shape, then reached down and lifted the still stunned were to his feet. I grabbed his face and brought it in line with mine.

"Tell Reyzl I'm coming for him," I said.

I would have sent him on his way, but Rebecca had other ideas. Without a word, she stepped up next to me and ran him through on the blessed sword.

"Send that message, and Reyzl will come for you himself," she said to me. "You may control the Great Were, but his power can still pollute you."

I knew she was right. I could still feel my adrenaline pumping from the experience of being the terrifying killing machine. He might not have been able to overtake me, but the promise of his power was an intoxicating temptation that I would be at risk of accepting every time I called on it, opening the door to the Great Were's dominion. Everything had its price, and I would have to reconsider the cost before calling on Ulnyx again.

Rebecca looked awful, her skin a translucent white, her hair dull and greying. The water had done its damage, drying her out to the point that bits of her skin flaked off with every movement she made.

"Let's get you out of here," I said.

"That was so awesome," Obi said, walking up behind us. "You guys kick complete ass."

Rebecca gave him a weak smile. “You were pretty good yourself, for a mortal,” she told him. He laughed off his adrenaline as we headed for the stairs.

“So what’s next?” Obi asked when we reached the ground floor. Punkmo was hunched down behind the front desk, on the phone with the Police.

“That’s right, gunshots,” he was saying. “Drug dealers? I don’t know, could be a gang too, who gives a crap. Are you going to send a car or what?” He didn’t look up as we walked past.

“We need to get Rebecca someplace dark so she can rest for awhile, “ I said. “And you and I need to talk.”

Just being out of the sun had already returned some of the opacity to the vampiress’ skin, and her hair was darkening by the moment. Even so, she still looked dry and sick. Dry and sick and stunning. We left the Belmont and headed uptown. I kept us to the shadows as we walked, only crossing the sun’s direct path when the limited cloud cover would obscure it.

“Why attack during the day?” I asked Rebecca.

“It was a calculated risk,” she replied. “Reyzl was hoping to catch you off-guard, maybe while you slept. He underestimated you.”

Him and me both. I had returned from my Source with a new sense of self, but I hadn’t expected the change to be so dramatic. Even after pulling down the water tower, I still felt like I had plenty in reserve. It had taken a fair share of missteps, but I was coming into my own.

“Where are we going anyway?” Rebecca asked.

“I’m upgrading our accommodations,” I said.

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“Man, I’ve always wanted to stay here,” Obi said as I pushed open the door to Room 1601 of the Waldorf=Astoria Hotel.

I had too, which is why I had decided to use the blank card Dante had given me to create a simulacrum of one of my mother’s credit cards. They had put the card on file at the front desk, but I had paid for the room with my remaining cash. After all, it wasn’t stealing if nothing got charged to it, right?

The suite itself was as magnificent as I had always imagined it would be, the large living area home to a fancy nineteenth century sofa and loveseat, some expensive looking ornate wood furniture and a big flat screen television. The bedroom was just as large, fitting a huge dresser and a king size bed covered in finery. The marble bathroom rounded out the opulence, and it was easy to picture myself as someone important like a movie star, or royalty. I laughed at the irony.

“What’s funny?” Rebecca asked. We were standing in the bedroom together, having left Obi watching television on the other side of the door.

“I was just thinking about being someone important like an actor,” I said. I looked at her. The daytime stroll hadn’t done her any favors. No amount of damage could undo her nascent beauty, but she looked ragged and tired. “How are you feeling?”

She was tentative in her reply. “I have a small problem,” she said.

I looked over to the windows. There was a fair amount of light coming in, but I hadn’t pulled the heavy drapes closed yet.

“Not dark enough?” I asked.

She smiled, but it wasn’t a positive smile. She looked anxious and uncomfortable. “Between the sun and the water, and I haven’t been home in almost three days,” she looked down at the floor, embarrassed. “I’m hungry.”

I felt like an idiot. I had forgotten about her dietary needs. Maybe the thought of her dining should have turned my stomach, but I had seen so much worse in the last twenty-four hours. Besides, I needed her far more than the world needed another pimp or gangbanger. I went over to the windows and pulled the drapes closed, making sure it was nice and dark.

“Just lay down for awhile,” I told her. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. It was colder than usual. “It shouldn’t take me too long to find somebody the world won’t miss.”

She lifted her head. There were tears in her perfect blue eyes. “You’re sweet, but there isn’t enough time,” she said. “I’ve taken too much of a beating the last few days. You’re not exactly Gandhi you know.”

“Okay, how about if I grab the bellhop?” It was intended as a joke, but the blunt truth was that if it came down to it I would have if she had asked. What she did ask for was easier to live with, but harder to acquiesce to.

“Landon, I don’t want to ask you to do this but... you’re a diuscrucis. Whatever I took, you’d regenerate.” Her eyes pleaded with me.

“You said my blood could be poison to you,” I reminded her. I wanted to help her, but the idea of anybody sucking up my life force was giving me the creepy crawlies.

“I have to risk it,” she said. “I don’t want you to kill an innocent person because of me. ”

I took a few steps back from her. “Just give me a second,” I said.

I had already been shot, stabbed, torn apart, and fallen from the fifty-something-ith story of a skyscraper. It was just the concept of it that was frightening me. I had seen enough vampire movies to be influenced, and I was being stupid. The only one who could be harmed was Rebecca, and she was as good as gone if I didn't agree to it. Seeing her standing there, her skin dry, her hair dull, her eyes wet with tears, there was no way I wouldn't do it.

I rushed forward, wrapped her up in my arms, pulled her head into my neck and closed my eyes. I felt the warmth of her breath on my skin, and then the soft touch of her incisors as she bit into me.

I had expected it to hurt, but it didn't cause any pain at all. The feeling was more of a euphoria, a strange emotional high. I could feel her mouth moving against my neck, and I could feel my body reacting as if we were engaged in more intimate activity. My heart was racing, my eyes blurred, and a million colors swam and danced in front of me, distracting me from the act.

All too soon, it was done. She pulled away from me, holding me up as I came off of the vampiric high and was left breathless and weak. Rebecca put me down on the bed, and then lay down on her side facing me. I stared at the ceiling for a few minutes while my body began to regenerate.

"Thank you," she said. She reached over and stroked my hair. "You don't know how much it means to me that you did this."

I turned my head. She looked healthy, radiant even. Her eyes were a cold blue fire, her lips redder and fuller, her skin smooth, silky, and shimmering as though she were covered in glitter. I had never seen anything like it. No human could ever hope to be as amazingly attractive.

"Chocolate or garlic?" I asked her.

She ran her tongue along her lips, tasting whatever leftovers remained there. "Better than chocolate," she replied. "I've never felt like this before."

"Me neither." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. My entire body was warm and tingling. With my eyes closed, I could still see residual ribbons of color like an aurora borealis in my brain.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," I said. "I just need a few minutes to recover. Did you get enough?"

"Right now I feel like I'll never need to feed again. If word got

out about the potency of your blood, you'd have every vampire on the planet hunting you down for a taste."

"You mean I don't already?"

She laughed. "Good point."

She slid closer to me and put her head on my shoulder and her arm over my chest. I reached around and held her to me. Such a simple closeness, but it felt so perfect. We sat together for a while, just enjoying the moment of quiet. When I heard Rebecca's breathing deepen, I carefully extracted myself and snuck out of the bedroom.

Obi was stretched out on the sofa, still watching television. When I slipped into the room, he sat up and turned it off.

"I was worried you weren't going to make it out of there," he said with a laugh.

I reached up and ran my hand over my neck. The bite marks had already healed over. "We're just friends," I told him.

Weren't we? I hadn't had time to give it much thought. She was beautiful, and I was attracted to her, but it was a lot more complicated than that, her impending death match with her father notwithstanding.

"It's none of my business anyway," he said, sitting up and turning off the TV. "The Exchange is a mess because of you," he continued. "After your little event at the soiree, most of the biggest dealers have gone to ground. They know we've been eavesdropping, and they're afraid of becoming your next target."

"They thought I was there to take down Merov?" I asked. That was better than I could have hoped for. We didn't need word getting back to the Demon Queen that I was after the Chalice.

"Yup, but there's more." His smile was huge. "They think the only reason anybody got out alive was because Reyzl showed up. They're scared bloodless of you. Hell, after what I saw today, so am I."

I hadn't thought about the positive effect I could have had if I had gone after the vampires. Dante had given me a goal, but maybe there were other opportunities that I wasn't considering.

"So the Exchange isn't producing much info anymore," I said. "Tell me you found another source."

"Who knew that demons were so into computers?" he said. "There's another site, it's a Freenet image board. They upload pics with the messages encrypted in the bytecode. Nasty stuff. Nothing

you'd ever want to have to look at." His smile faded, and he looked distracted. "But yeah, anyway I had some samples on the iPad, but they took it. I didn't get a chance to crack the encryption."

"It's okay if you don't want to go any deeper into that stuff," I said. I was already sorry for whatever it was he had seen.

"Don't sweat it man. I want to crack that code so we can find those assholes, and I can watch you rip their twisted heads off."

"I have another task for you if you're up to it. It's something a little more clandestine. Merov's apartment."

"What about it?" he asked.

"We need to get back in, and we need to break into his office. It's got some kind of fingerprint security system, but it's not his fingerprint. He keeps a sliver of the prior owner's finger in a case so he can get by. I think our lead on the Chalice is somewhere in that room. "

"Man, you had to swan dive fifty stories to get out of there, and now you want to go back *in* ?" He shook his head. "Wait a second. You said we."

"I need you to come with. If Merov has a computer, and I'm sure he does, you're going to need to be there to hack it."

Obi tapped his fingers on the coffee table while he thought about it. "So, you need me to try to figure out what kind of security he's using, come up with a way to circumvent it, and then hack his computer. Is that about right?"

"A blueprint of the building might come in handy too," I said. "I can't take you out the window."

"I'm starting to rethink my pledge of service," he said.

"Sorry Obi, you can't unbend the knee."

Obi stood up and headed for the door, grabbing his gun on the way by and tucking it into the back of his jeans. "I'll be at the library, doing some research," he said. He motioned towards the bedroom door with his head. "Try not to have too much fun while I'm gone."

He laughed when my face reddened and left before I could stammer on about how it wasn't like that, we were just friends, and we had business to take care of. Just thinking about the vampire girl sleeping in the bed on the other side of the door drove me to distraction. I had something else I wanted to take care of, so I scribbled out a quick note to Rebecca and slid it under the door.

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17

The sun was sinking towards the horizon when I pushed through the revolving doors of the Waldorf and stepped out into the street. The city around me was bustling with life, the organized chaos of humanity a comforting sight to my changing eyes. Before, I had seen myself as one of them who had been picked up and carried into something much bigger than I could have ever imagined. After my experience in my Source, I didn't feel as human anymore. I had grown, evolved into something... Better?

I hoped so, but it wasn't without its price. Watching people scurrying through the streets on their way here or there without a thought in their mind about what was happening out of their sight, they seemed so small and insignificant. My compassion was the one thing I least wanted to lose, because I knew there was nothing balanced in a total lack of feeling, and so I drank in the sight, took a moment to appreciate it, and continued on.

Dusk was creeping in by the time I finished the mile and a half walk down to the Garment District and came to a stop in front of the Holy Trinity Soup Kitchen, a small storefront at the bottom of

an office building that looked more like a former deli than a food bank. I don't know what had driven me there at this time of day, and I should have known that Josette wouldn't be there, the place had closed three hours ago. Even so, I could feel her presence in the air around me, much like I had at the Belmont the day after her visit, and I found a certain peace and comfort in it. She was spending her mornings doing good in one of the simplest ways possible, and while I wouldn't have thought much of it while I had been alive, I was coming to appreciate such simplicity now.

"Hey buddy, any spare change?"

I had been lost in thought, so the vagrant's hoarse voice startled me. He was standing on my right, dressed in an assortment of sweaters and jackets, his head wound up in three or four different hats. He was clean-shaven, young, and round enough that I didn't doubt he spent the money he begged for feeding himself.

"Sure," I replied, reaching into my pocket and pulling out one of my last twenties. .

"Thank you, sir," he said as I handed it to him. "Thank you so much." He turned to leave, but I stopped him.

"You don't happen to know a girl who volunteers here, she's about fourteen or so? Her name is Josette."

The homeless man got all doe-eyed at the name. "Everybody around here knows Josie," he said. "She's the sweetest little thing. She likes to do magic tricks for us to cheer us up. She's not in trouble or anything, is she?"

"No," I said. Not any more than usual I'd imagine. "But if you see her, can you tell her that Landon was looking for her. She knows who I am."

"Sure, buddy," he replied. "Have a good night."

"You too."

I watched him wander off into the night, and then spun around to begin the walk back up to the Waldorf. With any luck, Obi would have gotten what he needed before the evening wore on too long, and Rebecca would be as good as new after her nap. There was no part of me that was thinking my planned break-in of Merov's apartment was going to be easy or straightforward, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible.

I was headed away from the soup kitchen when a flash of light from the rooftop caught my attention. I looked up and caught just the faintest recognition of someone Divine moving away from me.

Josette? Had she been watching me the whole time, or had she just happened to stop by?

Assuming it was her, I wasn't going to just let her go. I did know why I had come to see her. It was because I wasn't sure what was going to happen over the next few days, and I wanted a chance to talk to her one last time. If it wasn't her, maybe they could tell me where she went at sundown. I started running.

My pace was intense, but I handled it with ease, my legs pumping hard to keep me moving on the ground faster than the angel was crossing the air. I kept my eyes focused on the path in front of me while keeping my senses trained on them. The pedestrian traffic was a blur around me as something in their subconscious told the crowd to part and let me through. To my amazement, even as I dissected busy intersections there was never a car crossing at the same time I was.

The chase continued for a few more blocks before the angel came to a stop. I slowed to a walk as I got closer, taking in my surroundings and ensuring they were alone. Satisfied, I glanced up to the rooftop where I knew the angel was waiting for me. Why they had chosen Macy's, *the* Macy's, I had no idea.

I changed my appearance before I made my way into the crowded department store, going for a more conservative businessman look with a long wool trench coat, Armani suit, and Italian leather shoes. To the shoppers around me, I was just another guy who had decided to do his Christmas shopping after work. I headed straight for the perimeter in search of a way onto the roof. I could sense the angel was stationary, waiting for me to arrive. I wished I knew how Josette had made that call to my soul so I could get in touch with whoever was up there with a little less effort.

I made my way towards the rear of the store, following the flow of employees as they moved from the storerooms back out onto the floor. There had to be a service elevator back there somewhere, or at the very least a stairwell that would lead to the top of the building. I slipped in behind a pair of Santa's elves that stepped out of the back pointing and giggling at each other, and then circuited the area until I found the maintenance stairs. Locked. I took the knob in my hand and focused, twisting the handle until I felt the whole mechanism crumble under the pressure.

"It took you long enough," the angel said when I stepped through the doorway and out onto the rooftop. I knew in an instant

that it wasn't Josette. She was older, taller, and way prettier, with long golden locks, a golden complexion, and a dancer's body. She was wearing a fitted leopard print raincoat and funky red plastic boots over a simple blouse and pants. It was a weird look, but somehow it worked.

"Do I know you?" I asked, stepping towards her. I hadn't bothered to bring a weapon with me. When would I learn?

"You do not," Boots replied. "But I know you, diuscrucis. We have been looking for you." We? I hadn't felt any other Divine nearby.

They came from the sky, swooping down on pairs of great white feathered wings and landing on the rooftop without a sound. Three more angels, each of them dressed in something like a toga, draped around their bodies to give freedom to their wings. When they landed, the wings tucked in behind them, compressing more than I would have thought possible so that they were almost invisible on their backs. Did Josette have wings? I hadn't noticed them.

I tried to stay calm and confident. If all angels could fight half as well as Josette, I didn't stand a chance. I could feel Ulnyx stirring within me. Now this was a fight he would be glad to join.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked.

"Josette Confessed," she said, as though that would explain it for me. The other three angels had taken position around me, putting me in the middle of a very holy box.

"Confessed?" I asked.

She didn't respond. Instead, she reached into her raincoat and produced a manila envelope, which she tossed at my feet. I bent down and picked it up, unclasping it and turning it over to let out a small stack of printed images. Ulnyx. My room at the Belmont. The vampires. As I flipped through them, I realized that they had somehow extracted the pictures from Josette's brain. Had she done this of her own volition, or had they forced her?

"We know that she Calmed you," Boots said, after waiting for me to flip through all of the images. "She should have done an extraction. It would have been a misguided action, but it could have explained why she had helped you to that point. Instead, she just left. We knew you would come looking for her at some point, so we've been watching the area."

She left? I fought to contain myself with the news. She hadn't been using me as Dante had suggested. She had been honest with

me.

“Where is she?” I asked, now fearing for what Confession meant. What had they done to her once they had uncovered her memories?

“That is none of your concern diuscrucis,” Boots said. “What you should be worried about is yourself. We know you have one of the amulets. What do you know about the Chalice?”

So that’s what this was about. They wanted the information that Josette hadn’t tried to take. They didn’t know I hadn’t known anything about it at the time, which in a way was kind of funny, but also kind of sad. They were blaming Josette for not getting intel that she couldn’t have gotten. Of course, I knew what they were after now, and I had a lead on where to find it. Maybe they could make themselves useful.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “You show up back here in an hour with Josette and agree to help me, and we can take care of the Chalice together.”

There was no hesitation, no consideration.

“No,” she replied. “Our laws are not to be bartered. Whether you tell us what you know or not, we will still destroy you.”

I saw the swords appear in the hands of the other angels. It was time to plan my escape.

“It will hurt less if you talk,” Boots said.

Why was it that it always came down to tired clichés? I flicked my eyes around the rooftop, hoping to find something to distract them. My greatest weapon was that I was an unknown quantity. They had to know I could call on Ulnyx, which I guessed was why they had come as a group, but they might not know what other tricks I could pull out of my sleeve. Or maybe they did know; the roof was sorely lacking in spare projectiles.

“Your laws are the reason you’re losing,” I said, refusing to let them see me sweat. “You think you can manage on your own, but it’s pretty obvious that you can’t, and the only one of you smart enough to see it ended up in your doghouse.”

“What would a diuscrucis know of laws, rules, or righteousness,” Boots hissed. “The power of the Lord guarantees our victory. Those of true faith know it to be so.”

I could see by her eyes she was giving commands to the other angels. They were playing it cautious.

“Now,” she said, “tell us what you know or raise your blade, but do not continue standing there like a coward.”

I stood there like a coward. I remembered when Josette and I were in the park.

“You can’t attack me if I don’t defend myself, can you?” I asked. “It’s against your rules.” A demon would never hesitate to attack an angel, or defend themselves from one, so they never had a problem there.

“Defend yourself,” Boots shouted, growing frustrated.

“No,” I replied.

I turned away from her so that I was facing the stairwell back down into the store. One of the angels was standing between it and me, a tall, muscular male with dark hair and a trimmed beard. I started walking away from them, moving to step around him when I got close enough.

Boots cried out in anger. “Do you know what we do to traitors,” she yelled. “How we make them Confess?”

I stopped walking and ever so slowly turned back around. Her face was a twisted mess of rage, her golden eyes blazing with hate. I knew what she was trying to do. She couldn’t lie, so she was making implications, hoping I would read malice and evil behind them. What I saw instead was desperation. I didn’t blame her for that, the demons had the upper hand and that had to be eating away at her soul. I resumed my walk towards the stairs, but Beard stepped in front of me.

“We cannot fight you if you will not fight back,” he said. “That doesn’t mean we have to let you leave.”

I looked up at him. I could feel Ulnyx all but begging me to let him out. The door was just a few feet away. I could be through it before they could stop me. All I had to do was get Beard to move over. We stood staring at each other for what seemed like an eternity. Then I stabbed him.

The single claw that had been my right middle finger pierced the angel’s heart, causing him to crumple to the ground. I had taken just enough from Ulnyx to create it, and could almost hear the demon in my mind, laughing at the results. I shut him off before he could get me into any more trouble, and then looked up to the stairwell door. It would be so easy to get away, but where would I go that they couldn’t find me? It wasn’t like I could just skip town.

I picked up Beard’s sword and once more turned to face Boots, unsure about what I was doing, but doing it anyway.

“You want to fight?” I asked.

Boots broke out her best supermodel smile and raised her sword up over her head. She seemed to float towards me, her feet leaving the ground and not touching back down until she was right on top of me. The other two angels had started moving too, and without a word, all three converged, their movements synchronized.

The sword I was holding was pretty much useless against them, and it wasn't like I knew what to do with it anyway. I had one idea, one somewhat twisted, desperate, crazy idea, and I had about three seconds to make it happen.

I focused my will hard on the sword, demanding that it lose its adhesion, its rigidity, and its molecular attraction. The weapon shattered in my hand much as the windows of Merov's apartment had. I held the pieces, twirling them around me as with as much velocity as I could manage. I could see the angels coming at me out of the corners of my eyes, could feel the rush of the air they were pushing toward me as they moved in, confident of their odds. They watched my maneuver with a measure of surprise but didn't even slow their attack. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and focused again.

Peppering them with shrapnel would be a minor diversion at best and wouldn't get me more than a few strides head start down the stairs. Instead, I sent the hundred or so slivers of metal hurtling forward on a different trajectory, one that put me right in their path. The pain of the steel passing through me was almost unbearable, but I convinced myself to stay lucent.

The angels cried out in pain as one, the shards exiting my body and entering theirs, coated in my blood. Josette had said all a demon needed to do to harm a seraph was to break the skin. Being half, I was betting my plasma wouldn't be too healthy lodged deep inside of them. It didn't matter if I were wrong. I wasn't going to survive this fight any other way.

It wasn't enough to stop their initial attack. The three blades all came down towards me at once, but the momentum had been broken, and I dropped and rolled backward just fast enough to avoid the strikes. Their swords clanged and sparked against the rooftop. They turned towards me as one, ready for round two. My own body was wracked with pain, and I didn't know if I had the strength to dodge another three-pronged attack. That was when I noticed the lines.

"What have you done," Boots cried, a growing spider web of

poisoned black veins climbing its way up her neck towards her face. She dropped her sword, her hand no longer strong enough to hold it. The other two angels weren't faring any better, their own blades clattering to the ground as they fell to their knees.

In that moment, I felt nothing but guilt. Good was struggling enough as it was, and here I was destroying four of its warriors. I hadn't wanted to, but what choice did I have? Maybe I should have run and taken my chances that they would have found me. It didn't matter. It was too late to second guess.

Tears fell from my eyes as the poison continued to spread, and their skin turned black. It was one thing to kill a demon, a creature that existed to create chaos, fear, and pain. It was another to destroy an angel, a being that worked to save lives, care for the sick, and empower the meek.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Boots toppled to the ground in front of me. When her body fell to dust, I began to cry in earnest.

I sat on the rooftop for almost an hour, my body healing, but my mind feeling as though it would be forever scarred by the vision of the dying seraphs. This was what I had agreed to do. It was what war was about. Raw, violent, and painful, filled with impossible choices, and unwinnable situations. I should have never gone to see Josette. I should have stayed with Rebecca, curled up on the bed with her, keeping her company while she slept.

To make it worse, I knew Josette hadn't betrayed me as I had thought, and that something had happened to her as a result. I didn't know where she was, or if she was okay. When this was over, if I lived, I would find her and tell her I was sorry for doubting her.

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Rebecca and Obi were sitting on the couch together watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* when I returned. Rebecca was in the middle of explaining how people couldn't be turned into vampires by being bitten when I pushed open the door to the room and stepped inside.

"Landon?" Rebecca asked, her voice concerned. Obi turned off the television and got to his feet.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I shook my head and walked over to them, then dropped the three blessed swords I had collected onto the coffee table. I didn't care that they chipped the wood and cracked the glass.

"What happened?" Rebecca glided to her feet and came over to me, reaching out and taking my hand in hers. She led me over to the sofa and eased me down onto it.

"I went to find Josette," I said. "Just to talk. I found someone else instead." I motioned towards the swords. "I didn't want to kill them. They wouldn't let me walk away."

"Touched?" Rebecca asked. She used her other hand to rub my back. It wasn't helping, but I appreciated the gesture.

“Angels,” I replied.

She froze in shock. “Three of them?”

“Four,” I said, then told them the entire story. They listened intently, though Obi blanched when I described how the angels had died.

“There was nothing you could have done, man,” Obi said. “They decided they wouldn’t let you walk, they paid the price for it. I don’t like the idea of killing the good guys either, but you’re a lot more important to mankind than they are.”

“The servants of good are stubborn beyond reason.” Rebecca agreed. “How many do they need to lose before they realize they can’t fight on their own?”

“At least four,” I replied. I wasn’t looking to be cheered up, or have my actions justified. All I wanted was to just get it off my chest. Their words didn’t comfort me, but I did find myself growing angrier at the situation. I took a deep breath and put it from my mind. Whatever feelings were being generated by the experience, they had to wait. I turned to Rebecca.

“How are you feeling?” I asked. She looked great, but I wanted to be sure.

“Ready to go,” she said. “To be honest, I don’t think I’ve ever felt better.”

I couldn’t help but smile. She returned a demure smile of her own. “Obi?”

He noticed the moment and stifled a laugh. “I got as much as I could.”

“Tell me.”

Obi got up and went over to his bag, flopping it open and pulling out a new stack of printed papers. He moved the swords off the coffee table with surgical delicacy and spread the papers out on the surface.

“It was a bitch to get this thing printed,” he said of the architectural drawings of the building Merov called home.

“Wait a second,” Rebecca said, recognizing the layout. “What is it you’re planning?” She took her hand from my back and moved to get a closer look at the prints.

“Your father has a room that can only be opened by fingerprint. A very specific fingerprint,” I said.

“It’s his office,” she said. “The fingerprint belonged to Trevan Solen, my grandfather. He built the room to prevent anyone from

being able to enter, including the Divine. The fingerprint only disables the electromagnetic lock on the door. There are other defenses inside that require spoken passphrases to shut down. Do you think that Merov knows where the Chalice is?"

"I'm not sure. I know he's enough of an influence that Reyzl showed up at his... Well, your party, and that he gave you an amulet. I'm pretty sure Reyzl knows where the Chalice is, but I'm guessing that he'll never give it up, and I'm not too keen on going head to head with him again right now anyway. Oh, I never did ask you, why was Reyzl at your party?"

It didn't seem possible that she could have become paler than she already was, but Rebecca's alabaster complexion turned almost all white.

"Merov's been trying for years to get in Reyzl's good graces," she said. "As a major demon he has the power to lift him to archvampire, which would put him in charge of all of the families in North America, provided he could defeat the current archvampire in combat. The demon is... Intrigued with me."

"Intrigued as in?"

She didn't want to say it, but after a long awkward pause, she did. "He wants to dissect my brain, to understand why I am 'so sentimental towards my food,' as he puts it. Then he wants to see if he can reprogram me to be less sympathetic. Then he wants to take me as his concubine. At least, that's how Merov described it. I doubt it would be as clinical as that."

I took a deep breath and swallowed the lump that had grown in my throat. For as much as I had been hoping to avoid a direct confrontation with Reyzl, everything I learned about him made it sound more and more inevitable. Would my anger be enough to overpower him? In that moment, I was dying to find out.

"I see," I said, trying to be calm. "Another good reason to come over to my side."

I guess I could have been angry she had chosen me because she was stuck between a rock and a hard place, but she had already proven too valuable to care too much about the circumstances. The fact that I was developing a more-than-friends kind of crush on her didn't hurt either. It was all Obi's fault for putting the thought into my head.

"It wasn't like that," Rebecca said, her eyes locking onto mine. "Landon, I didn't help you just to get away from Reyzl." She wasn't

lying.

I put my hand on her face and looked into her eyes. “I know,” I said. “Don’t worry about it. I just can’t believe your own father would sell you out like that.”

She reached up and put her hand over mine. “He is nosferatu; a minor demon, but still a demon. There is nothing that comes ahead of gaining power and favor. Family is either a bargaining chip or a liability. Nothing more.”

“Cough cough,” Obi said, interrupting our moment. “I hate to get in the middle of the Princess Bride, but um... Yeah?”

I took my hand away and looked down at the prints. “I don’t suppose you know what the passphrases are?” I asked Rebecca. Her laugh was enough of an answer. “Then let’s just hope he didn’t design his traps to stop a diuscrucis. Obi, tell me what I’m looking at.”

The former marine pointed at the schematic. “Okay, the normal human entry points are here.” The elevator. “Here.” A stairwell. “And here.” He pointed to another area that looked like it should have been a solid wall. “That one, I had to dig deep to find. I’m sure you know this Rebecca, but the building was constructed by Alpha Industries, a huge contracting firm owned very indirectly by the Solen family.”

“Your human mob does a lot of garbage collecting,” she said. ‘Vampires tend to prefer architecture.”

“It’s a hidden escape route,” Obi continued. “An elevator shaft with a small stairwell that wraps around it. I found one reference to it in the first draft of the blueprints, which I had to hack into Alpha’s servers to get. Don’t ask me how,” he said, cutting me off before I could. “Anyway, it doesn’t go to ground level, it goes deeper. Much deeper; it’s below the sewer and subway systems.”

“Where does it lead?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Obi answered. “I was hoping your girlfriend could tell us.” Rebecca and I both flushed. “Man, you guys are like a pair of grade schoolers.”

Rebecca ignored his jab. “It most likely leads to an escape tunnel. It’s a standard defense against demons.”

I was confused. “Demons? Not angels?”

“Okay, I can see you’re still missing a little from basic training,” she said. “Think about how many demons there are, and how many angels there are.”

I had no idea what the numbers looked like, but now that she mentioned it, demons did seem to be a lot more prevalent.

“So how does one defeat an enemy force that has ten to twenty times more combatants?” she asked. “In the case of demons, most times you don’t have to. If we didn’t spend so much time fighting amongst ourselves, we could have laid waste to this world years ago. The angel’s favorite tactic is to turn demons on each other.”

Pure genius. It explained how the seraphim had managed to hold the tide as long as they had, when as Josette had said few enough were willing to abandon Heaven for the real Holy War.

“So that’s our emergency exit too,” I said. “The tunnel will funnel any defenders from being able to gang up on us. It should be a cakewalk for the three of us to hold them back down there and make an organized retreat.”

“Agreed,” Rebecca said.

Obi didn’t look too comfortable with the idea, but he nodded. “What about going in?” he asked.

“Tell me if there’s any reason we shouldn’t just use the front door, “ I said.

There were the were guards, but I was pretty confident I could get us past them again. There was no way they would expect me to try to go into the building a second time, so they’d never suspect anyone they recognized.

“None that I can think of,” Obi replied.

“Rebecca?”

“If we’re discovered, it won’t matter much where we are - we’ll have to fight them off either way. The front door is as good as anything else.”

“Okay, then we’ll go in through the lobby. Play it straight, take the stairs.”

“The stairs,” Obi said. “Man, that’s fifty stories.”

I looked at him. “Weren’t you a Marine?”

“I’m a former Marine. I haven’t done that kind of hike in two years.”

“I’ll help you if you’re too weak to make it,” Rebecca said.

That was just what Obi needed to hear. “I’ve got it,” he said.

I turned to Rebecca. “Do you have any idea what kind of entourage your father has? Or if he’ll be there?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea. I’ve never lived in the apartment with him, and before the party we hadn’t spoken in at least four

months. Since he told me about the deal he was trying to make with Reyzl."

I cringed at her mention of the deal, my anger bubbling back up. "Then I guess we'll see what's what when we get there. Now, how do we handle the lock?"

Obi picked up the prints of the apartment building and exchanged it for some diagrams of the security system.

"It may not be this one," he said. "The records listed the manufacturer, not the exact model, but I bet most of them are the same. It's an electromagnetic fingerprint lock, five thousand pounds of pressure, powered by the electricity in the building when it's working, a backup battery when it isn't." He looked at me. "I was thinking maybe you could short out the power and disrupt the battery somehow. Otherwise, we'll need to remove the faceplate and wire it up to a laptop to hack the software that runs it. I could do it, except I don't have tools or a laptop."

I reached into my pocket and took out the remaining cash. I had sixty dollars left. "I don't think this will cover it," I said.

"All my funds were cut off," Rebecca said. We both looked at Obi.

"Fine," he said after thirty seconds of being stared down. "I'll put it on my card, but you owe me."

"Thanks, Obi," I said. "So Plan A is for me to try to short the system somehow. I haven't tried to control electricity yet, so that scares me. I don't want to end up frying myself or either one of you." I looked at Obi. "Especially you, Rebecca will heal."

"I'd rather not," Rebecca said. "We don't recover very quickly from burns, and pardon the bad pun, but it hurts like Hell."

"Right. Plan B is for Obi to hack the software to disable the lock. I won't spend a lot of time on Plan A, so be let's be ready for B as soon as we get in. Also, if we end up in a fight, Plan A is out the window because I'll be busy covering you. We'll do our best to go in and out through the main entrance. I'll try to keep us disguised, but if we end up in a scrape we'll exit through the emergency hatch. Even if they follow, we can defend ourselves better in the smaller space. If you don't like the plan, speak up now." I waited a minute for either of them to object. They didn't. "Okay, we'll hit up an electronics shop first for the laptop and any other equipment, and then we'll head straight over. Saddle up, move out, game on."

I put my hand out over the table. Obi didn't hesitate to throw

his hand in, but Rebecca was confused by the gesture.

"Just put your hand in," Obi told her, laughing. She did.

"Break on three," I said. "One... Two... Three..."

"Break," Obi and I shouted. Rebecca didn't know what to do, but she found it amusing all the same. It was corny, but better to go in loose.

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“You guys ready?” I asked.

We were standing on the corner opposite the apartment building, after having visited a nearby pawnshop to pick up the tools we needed for Obi to hack the lock. An older laptop, a lock pick set, a magnetic screwdriver and a bunch of bits, a circuit board, and some wires that I didn’t recognize but Obi claimed would do the job.

Rebecca had brought two of the angels’ swords with her, and I was carrying the other one - Boot’s sword. When I had taken a closer look at it, I had found it was different than the others. It was a little bit shorter and lighter, and had a few extra characters engraved into it. I didn’t know what they meant or if they gave it any special powers, but I figured the size difference might make it easier for me to stab something that wasn’t myself.

“I’m ready,” Rebecca said.

She had created a makeshift sling out of a few belts she had picked out at the pawnshop to hold the blades over her back. I could imagine what the clerk would have thought if he had been

able to see her true nature. A pale, raven-haired, ice-blue eyed, glittering vampire-slash-succubus beauty in paramilitary garb toting two super badass looking samurai swords. Instead, he had seen a girl-next-door type with a pair of golf clubs that she was looking to pawn. The clerk had offered her ten bucks; she had refused.

I looked at Obi, who gave me the thumbs up. He had traded in the messenger bag for a backpack, and was wearing the Desert Eagle tucked into the back of his pants, hidden by his shirt.

"Okay, once we get a visual we'll move in," I said.

Obi had the idea to wait for three people to leave the building, and then go in disguised as them. It was a great idea, but I wasn't sure I could pull it off. A couple was the first to exit, two Turned humans dressed in their finery, headed off to some other well-to-do event elsewhere in the city. I paid close attention to them from a distance as they walked down the street. I didn't need to get every detail right, but the closer, the better.

A third Turned male exited the building a couple of minutes later. I took a deep breath and focused; changing reality around us so that we took on the visage of the three people I had seen. It was a little troubling that they had all been evil, but I guess it made sense that Merov would keep his allies close at hand.

"You two go in first as the couple," I said. "I'll be right behind you."

Obi and Rebecca started forward, crossing the street and walking towards the building. I started half a minute later, keeping the same pace so we wouldn't look like we were together. I bit back a smile when they made it in past the doorman without a second glance. I wasn't so lucky.

"Mr. Taylor," the doorman said as I approached. "Back so soon?"

"Yeah," I replied. "I forgot my wallet." I patted my pocket for emphasis.

"Have a good evening sir."

I didn't answer him. I doubted a Turned would be that polite. I caught up to Obi and Rebecca in the lobby near the elevators. We had made it into the building, now we just had to ascend. I motioned to the stairwell off to the right. I would go in first, and they would follow one at a time over the next three minutes.

Getting to the stairs unseen proved to be a simple task, and we were formed up together six minutes later.

"Now comes the hard part," Obi said as we started to climb.

Rebecca had offered to carry his pack for him, an offer which he had impolitely refused while she laughed.

I took us almost half an hour to reach the fiftieth floor. As expected, the door into the penthouse was both locked and alarmed.

"Just give me a minute," Obi said, opening his pack and digging out the lock pick set and a magnet. "I'll unlock the door, and then use this magnet to loop the signal back on itself so the alarm doesn't know it should be going off." A minute later, he was done, and we were in.

"You're my own personal MacGyver," I said.

We slipped through the quieted doorway and into Merov's penthouse. We were in the kitchen, a large commercial grade menagerie of stainless steel and tile. I didn't want to imagine what kind of meat had passed through this room, or how it had been prepared. Drained and discarded was my best-case scenario, but the Fresh Fleshette had proven it wasn't as simple as all that. We were in luck. The place was deserted.

I recalled the schematics in my mind. The kitchen led out into the main service area, where there would be a big freezer, storage closet, and a couple of other rooms that hadn't been labeled. I focused on my senses, but I didn't pick anything up. As near as I could tell, the entire apartment was deserted. I hadn't sensed those angels either. Were they able to disguise themselves, or was it just the distance that had messed with my head? I wasn't about to take chances.

We moved out of the kitchen and into the main service hallway. The entrance to the penthouse proper was thirty feet forward, with a freezer and three more doors symmetrically placed on either side. I heard the crying as we neared the end of the hallway.

"Do you hear that?" I asked Rebecca.

The sobs were barely audible even in the silence and seemed to be coming from the last door on the left. Rebecca cocked her head to the side and listened.

"Yes," she said after a few seconds. "Stay focused on our task." She didn't need me to say anything to know I would look to help whoever was in there.

I put my ear up against the door. Someone in there was crying, most likely another victim, waiting to be consumed. My actions the other night had killed the women Merov had put out as hors

devours, I wasn't about to let another one die to this asshole.

"We get her out before we leave," I whispered. There was nothing in my expression or tone that left it open to argument.

The doors to the service hallway were actually a hidden part of the wall that slid outward from the center so as not to obstruct the space. We were fortunate that they were well maintained and didn't make a sound when we opened them. Or maybe we weren't so fortunate. The scene behind the door wasn't worth the price of admission.

It looked as though the entire apartment had been abandoned since the party. The blood fountain still sat in the center of the main open area, though there was no blood remaining in it. The band's instruments were resting at the top of the landing. Even what was left of the 'Happy Birthday' banner remained hanging above the living room. What caught my attention though were the beds, stained with the blood of the victims that I had killed, and the windows.

The huge windows that I had brought in on the party had been repaired. They looked like stained glass, with the millions of shards haphazardly mashed together in no discernible pattern, held together by dried blood, bones, and skin. It was a gruesome paste of death, conceived to restore the mirrored glass and prevent the sunlight from piercing the penthouse. The sight made it hard to think, and the smell made it hard to stay upright. It was impossible for Obi, and he doubled over, fighting to keep himself from vomiting.

I was about to step into the room, eager to get this over with and get out of this freakish nightmare, when Rebecca grabbed my arm and pointed up at the stairway leading to the landing. I followed her arm until it led me to a stone figure, a four-foot tall gargoyle. There were six of them on each side of the landing.

"Real?" I asked her. She nodded. "I thought gargoyles were good? They're on a lot of churches."

"A trick," Rebecca said. "Church architects used to put them there to fool demons into thinking they already had the building covered. They can't be sensed unless they're animated. I didn't think Merov had access to them. Gargoyles are incredibly hard to control."

"Not Merov then," I said. "Does anyone else have a bad feeling about this?"

“A trap?” Rebecca asked.

“Maybe; or maybe an educated guess. Let’s just try to be quiet.”

Of course Obi chose that moment to lose the battle against his delicate sensibilities, and the contents of his stomach came spilling out onto the floor. I don’t know if it was the noise or the smell, but twenty-four small yellow eyes snapped open at once, and twelve monstrous heads turned our way.

“Crap,” Obi said, seeing the fruits of his labor. He reached behind his back to grab the Eagle.

“Don’t,” Rebecca hissed at him. She unslung her blades. “Gargoyles are immune to silver, and the bullets will just bounce off them anyway.”

Obi sighed. “What should I do then, make myself look really big?”

I motioned towards the living area. “Head that way, make a right at the first hallway. Down to the end on the left, start working on the door. Go!”

Obi broke into a run. The gargoyles were unballing themselves and stretching, their hard grey skin cracking as they shifted. With a soft hiss, the lead gargoyle launched into the air and unfurled its wings. It made a beeline straight for Obi while the rest of the demons headed our way.

“Anything they aren’t immune to?” I asked Rebecca. I had to keep them away from Obi, so I didn’t wait for her to answer before chasing after the ex-Marine.

“You’re carrying it,” she shouted. I turned my head to look at her while she set herself for the onslaught. Carrying it? I had forgotten about Boots’ sword. It figured they were going to make me use it.

Rebecca had made me a sling also, and I stumbled when I reached back to retrieve the blade. The lead gargoyle had flown upward in order to come down on Obi from a higher angle. I launched myself forward, desperate to reach him before it did.

The demon swooped, not a single note of sound escaping from it as it dove down.

“Obi,” I screamed, diving towards him with my shoulder forward.

I hit him hard, sending him sprawling, but saving him from the gargoyle that slammed off-center into my back instead. The force and momentum pushed me to ground, and sent the gargoyle

caroming off into the wall. We both recovered while Obi regained his senses and resumed his run for the office.

I crouched down and held the sword out in front of me. The gargoyle climbed back to its clawed feet. Outstretched, it was eight feet of rippling muscle. It mimicked my crouch, cautious in its approach.

I used the opportunity to glance over at Rebecca. She had her back against the wall and was squaring off against three of the demons. Her fangs were bared and elongated, her eyes clouded over to their lifeless black. I checked on the other gargoyles. They were headed this way.

The first gargoyle got tired of waiting on me and lunged. I dodged its swipe, and then danced out of the way of a second blow. One more swing and miss, and I flicked the blessed sword up and under its chin, feeling almost no resistance from the blade opening a long cut in its neck. The creature howled in pain and backed away, replaced by the reinforcements. I looked down the room for Obi, but he had at least managed to get out of the action and with any luck was in the process of disarming the door.

Three to one were bad odds against a demon that was impervious to almost everything. I focused my will inward; pushing myself to be stronger, faster, and tougher than any human could ever hope to be. I was almost decapitated when my first effort failed, my skill at bending the universe still not a surety. The attack put a deep gash into my neck and sent me skidding across the floor, the gargoyles trailing right behind. It hurt, and the sensation of having my head hanging from my spine was weird and creepy.

I focused again, rewarded for my persistence with the results I had been looking for. I healed in no time and grabbed the first gargoyle that tried to jump on me and threw it away. I could hear it go smashing through the living room, but I didn't know how much damage I had inflicted. It didn't matter because I had more demons incoming. I pushed off on the ground with my free hand, the augmented strength sending me high into the air. Everything around me looked like it was in slow motion, and I felt as though I had all day to make whatever maneuvers I needed on the way down.

I lashed out with my foot at one gargoyle, launching it backward to land on the floor stunned a dozen feet away, whipped around with the sword on two more, hit the ground, crouched under an

attempted grab, then propelled myself into the fourth blade-first. I landed on its chest, and it slid across the floor, impaled. When I looked up, Rebecca was standing over me, her mouth wide in an impressed grin.

"Having fun yet?" she asked.

To be honest, I was.

There were five gargoyles left, and Rebecca and I tore into them with an unmatched fury. She was a blur of steel, legs, and hair, leaping into the air, kicking the gargoyle's claws aside and depositing one of the blades deep into its skull.

I used Boots' sword to remove a claw, and then a leg, leaving a howling monster for Rebecca to finish off while I stabbed the third in the heart. The remaining two decided it was time to flee, but Rebecca threw a blade into one of the gargoyle's backs, then pounced onto the other one, hissing as she reached around and cut its throat. She was wiping the weapon clean on its skin before it hit the ground.

"I didn't know you could fight like that," I said to her after she retrieved the other sword and rendezvoused with me. She leaned in and kissed my cheek.

"Me neither," she said. "Your blood is amazing." Her eyes changed back to their beautiful blue, and the look she gave me melted my brain.

"I think we better check on Obi," I said, trying to catch my breath. We made our way to where the former Marine was working the electromagnetic lock.

"Man, I don't know if I can hotwire this thing," he said when we got to him. "This isn't the standard software package, it's been seriously customized."

"The gargoyles may not have gotten away, but its a good bet they sent an alarm out when they woke," Rebecca said. "I don't think we have a lot of time."

"It looks like Plan A is the new Plan B," I said. "Both of you back away from the door."

Once they had moved, I stood in front of the door and focused, trying to force the lock to disengage. It was a futile effort. I tried to short out the electrical connection and was rewarded with a whole bucket of nothing. We were running out of time, and we weren't getting anywhere.

"Obi," I said. "Go back to the service area and let out whoever is

trapped in there. Bring them back here, they aren't safe on their own."

"I don't think that's a good idea, man," Obi said.

"Do it," I shouted.

Obi's expression said 'screw you', but he followed the order. I looked at the door again. There had to be some way through. I crouched down and lifted the fingerprint sensor so I could look at it. If Rebecca's grandfather had ever touched the surface, maybe I could get his print. I stood up again.

"Open your mouth," I said to Rebecca.

"What?"

"Just open your mouth."

She did, and I took my thumb and ran it up along her fang, slicing it open. She licked at the blood that dripped onto her lips while I crouched back down and pressed it to the sensor. I focused on it, using it like a detective would use chalk. It was our lucky day because a defined print assembled itself in my blood. I focused again to thicken and solidify it, creating enough light resistance to fool the system. The door clicked and swung open a few inches. We were in!

"Nice trick."

I knew that voice. Rebecca and I both turned our heads to see Merov standing at the end of the hallway with two burly weres. One was restraining Obi. The other one was holding the girl I assumed was Merov's prisoner. She was young, a little chubby, wearing a grey wool sweater and a pair of jeans. Her face was ordinary; her eyes brown and glazed from tears. She was still whimpering. I had been too distracted with the lock to notice them coming.

"Wait until you see my next one," I replied. It seemed like as good a time as any for a smartass remark. Merov was unfazed.

"Reyzl was sure you'd be back. I told him there was no way, but I guess that's why he's the Boss. I'm surprised you brought a human with you though. He's not even Touched! And he was trying to make off with my virgin! By the way, it's good to see you again my dear." Malicious was too soft a word for the smile he gave his daughter.

I held up my hands. "Okay, you've got us," I said. "Now what."

He laughed. "As if it would be that easy to capture you. I didn't rise this far by being stupid diuscrucis." He raised his hands and

gestured for his goons to release their prisoners. Both Obi and the girl stumbled down the hallway. “I know if it came down to it, you’d just kill them to get to me,” he said.

I would never have told Obi, but the vampire was right.

“So what is it you want?” I asked. When they reached us, the girl put her arms around Obi and continued to shake.

“A deal, of course,” he replied.

“Landon,” Rebecca said. “Be careful making deals with demons.”

“Of course. Name it,” I said.

He walked forward, unconcerned for his safety. I doubted he was as vulnerable as he appeared. “My sweet daughter owes me a dance,” he said, looking right at her. “If she wins, I’ll be dead, and she’ll be in control of the family. You can get whatever information you want, no tricks needed.” He stopped right in front of me. “If I win, you’ll kill Reyzl for me. Once he’s dead, you’ll leave me to control the Northeast, and take your nasty business elsewhere.”

There was something amusing about him calling my work nasty. I wasn’t the one torturing young virgins before drinking their blood.

“Landon, don’t,” Rebecca said. “Remember what I told you.”

Merov laughed. “Did she tell you she can’t beat me?” he asked. “Ironic that it should come down to a question of faith. Do you have faith in my daughter, even when she doesn’t have it in herself?”

I looked at Rebecca. She was frightened. “What if I just kill you where you stand?” I asked him.

“You won’t,” he said.

“Because...”

He smiled again. “Because then she gets nothing. You know where she stands. Now imagine having our family capitulating to her orders; three thousand nosferatu following her lead.”

He was willing to do the deal because he was confident. He had no doubt in his mind that he could kill his daughter, and this was his big chance to get rid of Reyzl, get rid of me, and put himself into greater power. Rebecca had said Reyzl could make him an archvampire, but why settle for that when you could aim even higher? I glanced between Merov and Rebecca - the confident father and his frightened child. It was an offer I couldn’t refuse.

“You have a deal,” I said.

“Landon, no,” Rebecca cried. It was too late, and she knew it.

“You have five minutes,” Merov said. “I’ll be waiting in the living room.” He turned and left, his heavies following close behind.

“What did you just do,” Rebecca hissed once Merov was out of range.

I took hold of her shoulders and lowered my head so she could see into my eyes. “I doubled-down on your bet,” I told her. “Like you said, it’s a risk, but it’s one both of us need to take.”

Her angry expression softened. She slumped forward into my arms. “I’ll do my best. If I lose… I’m sorry.”

I held her for a minute before easing her out of the embrace. My heart was thudding in my chest, my body feeling an unnatural chill. It wasn’t the temperature that was making me so cold. I was finding the thought of Merov winning more frightening than anything I had experienced. Merov winning meant Rebecca would be gone.

“You won’t lose,” I said. “You can’t. You’re running on premium.”

It was a joke that ended up feeling lame to say, but the statement perked her up. She straightened her posture, licked her lips, and then smiled. “I hadn’t even considered that. I’m going to wipe the floor with that asshole.”

“Can somebody tell me what’s going on here?” Merov’s prisoner had stopped whimpering long enough to speak. She was still holding onto Obi’s arm like it was the only thing keeping her sane.

“I’m sorry,” I said to her. “It’s better for you if you don’t know. What’s your name?”

“Cathy.”

“Cathy, I’m going to get you out of here unharmed, okay?”

She didn’t look convinced, but she nodded. “Okay.”

“Good. Don’t worry about anything. Rebecca, can you?”

Rebecca stepped over to Cathy and took her face in her hand. “You’re so pretty,” Cathy said.

“Thank you, Cathy,” Rebecca replied. “Now go to sleep.”

She received the Command as though she had been hypnotized, her eyes rolling back in her head and her entire body going limp. Obi caught her on the way down, easing her fall.

“Time to go kill my father,” Rebecca said.

“Rebecca.” I reached out and grabbed her by the arm as she started to storm away.

It was all I had time to say because then her lips were locked onto mine, and she was kissing me like it would be her last chance. Every sense of everything else in the universe faded away. I absorbed every ounce of emotion that she poured into the kiss,

amplifying and returning it mixed with every feeling she had created within me since we had met. It was deep, meaningful, and passionate, a hello and a goodbye both. When she pulled away from me, it was all I could do to stay balanced.

"Much better than chocolate," she repeated.

"Break a leg," I said, trying to catch my breath.

"I'll break a lot more than that."

Obi and I followed behind her as she resumed her angry march towards her destiny. Reaching the main living space, I saw that Merov had stripped down to a white t-shirt and a pair of black sweats. I had thought the vampire was stocky, but his body was well muscled. It was his powerful barrel chest that had made him appear fat. He looked like he could pulverize his child without effort.

"I'm sorry to have to do this to you my dear," he said when he noticed Rebecca approaching.

She didn't waste time with formality. Instead she kicked off her shoes, opened her mouth and hissed a challenge, her body shifting back into attack mode. This time she did a complete transformation, her fingers and toes elongating into deadly claws. She was on Merov in an instant, catching him off guard and leaving a deep gash in his cheek before he could react. He bellowed and shifted himself, showing us why he was the head of the family.

Where Rebecca could grow longer fangs and claws, Merov's entire body changed. He grew at least six feet, his muscle expanding his skin so much it looked like it was going to tear, his face taking on a non-humanoid look as all of his teeth grew and pushed against his mouth. He was more beast than man, a monster in civilized clothing.

He caught Rebecca's fist when she tried to dig into his chest, twisted her arm and threw her across the floor. "Come now dear, you can do better than that," he said, his voice so deep it was hard to understand.

Rebecca got back to her feet and approached again, more cautious after the last hit. She looked miniscule framed against her father's insane mass of power.

"I've hated you my entire life," she told him. "I can't wait to watch you die."

She danced forward, dodged a heavy punch, and raked her claws across his chest. It was so thick it didn't even break through

the skin, and she was rewarded by a backhanded blow to the head that sent her tumbling away. He was toying with her.

"You know how I hate to disappoint you," he said. "But I'm afraid I'll have to make you wait a while longer."

He dashed forward with a speed that should have been impossible for his size, and then raised his foot to stomp his daughter. I cringed as the huge claw came down on her. Somehow she was able to get her feet under her, and she caught the foot in her hands and shoved. Off balance, Merov crashed backward onto the ground.

Rebecca didn't hesitate, leaping into the air and leading with her feet. She managed to dig a little deeper into his chest when she hit, but he lashed out and sent her flying off him again, then got back up. Rebecca recovered, landing upright and pressing the attack. She angled back and forth, trying to keep Merov off balance. She had no chance against him on strength, but she was still quicker and more agile.

"I didn't think you'd be this much fun," Merov said with a laugh.

Rebecca responded with a flurry of blows that her father either blocked or absorbed with his massive bulk. The wounds she was inflicting were adding up, but they seemed like no more than paper cuts across the massive expansive of his body. The wave left her winded and off-balance, and Merov didn't waste the opening, grabbing her by the throat and lifting her well off the ground.

"Goodbye dear," he said, turning his head so he could leer at me while he finished the fight.

I assume he had been planning to pop her head right off like a cork. He didn't get the chance. With a blinding speed that I almost couldn't follow, Rebecca kicked her legs up and wrapped them around his arm, then twisted her hips. The crack of his limb breaking was painfully loud, and he dropped her and cried out as it fell limp. She landed on her feet and moved in again, grabbing his other arm and snapping it at the elbow before he could react. He lashed out with his foot, but she sidestepped it and brought her own kick down on his kneecap, shattering those bones as well.

Unable to support the massive weight, Merov sank to his knees, his eyes filled with rage, fury, and pride? Rebecca saw it too, and she stopped her assault.

"You've grown so much," the vampire said to his daughter. "I didn't think you had it in you."

She had fooled him into thinking she was spent, and he would pay with his life.

"You've never thought much of me," she said to him.

"No," he admitted. "That's because your mother was such a filthy whore."

Without another word, she reached out and grabbed his head, breaking his neck before he could say anything else. She stood motionless, watching his lifeless body topple to the ground, her black eyes a mask to whatever emotions were playing across her mind. A moment later, black fog began rising out of Merov's mouth. I started moving towards her, to warn her of the danger, but she closed her eyes and opened her mouth to receive it. What was she doing?

I had never seen the process from the outside. The cloud transferred from father to daughter in a steady stream of ashen smoke that twisted and curled around her. Once it was finished, she bowed her head to the disintegrating carcass and turned to the two weres who had waited on the sidelines.

"You have borne witness," she said to them.

"Yes, mistress," they agreed.

"Go wait in the lobby," she commanded.

"Yes, mistress," they said in unison. They headed off towards the elevator. Rebecca looked at me, the black of her eyes fading away to reveal oceans of blue. She looked the same, but different, more regal. I gave her a concerned smile. She came over.

"Man, that was unreal," Obi said from behind me. "I couldn't even see her she was moving so fast."

"That was incredible," I told her. She threw her arms around my neck and pulled me down to her, kissing me as with the same force as she had the last time.

"I have you to thank," she said once we had broken our embrace. "I've never felt so strong."

"Merov's soul?" I asked.

"It is part of the rights of ascension. The defeated surrenders their power to the victor, along with their knowledge."

"Do you mean you can turn into a ten-foot tall Rebecca now?" I asked.

"Come on, worm," she replied. "My power doesn't manifest the same way since I'm only half-nosferatu. For Merov, it was strength. For me, it's speed. I also inherited a measure of his memories. I

know the passphrases to get into his office."

Excited didn't even scratch the surface of what that statement made me feel. "I hate to be a bother," I said, "but would you mind?"

Rebecca laughed. "I don't mind, but we don't have time." Her attitude turned serious. "I have a lot more to tell you, but we have to go. Your friend Josette is in trouble."

"Trouble?" I asked. I didn't even know where Josette was.

"The demons are making a move tonight," she said. "Merov had just left to participate when the gargoyles alerted him to our break in. They're going after an angel sanctuary, and all of the major players have amulets."

"The amulets don't work," I said.

"They do, but there's a catch," Rebecca said. "The demon who controls the Chalice can manipulate the power of the crystals. If they lose one or one is taken, they can shut it down."

"Like a remote kill switch?" Obi asked, moving in to join the conversation.

"Exactly."

"How do you know Josette is at this sanctuary?" I asked. I didn't even know what an angel sanctuary was.

"Reyzl promised her to Merov in exchange for his participation. She's there, and she's in trouble. I know she's your friend, so if you want any hope of saving her we have to go now."

It wasn't like there was a decision to be made. "Where to?" I asked.

"The Catskills," Rebecca said.

"Whoa," Obi said. "Catskills? Like the mountains?"

Rebecca looked at him as if he had two heads. "Yes. There is a Monastery there that serves as a seraphim sanctuary. The demons have known about it for some time, but they didn't believe they could win a battle on the angel's home turf. The Grail has changed that."

I knew what Obi was getting at. "Rebecca, we don't have any way to get to the Catskills."

She gave me a big smile. "We do now," she said.

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The battle started before we even got down into the parking garage of the building, when I told Obi I needed him to stay with Cathy and take her home once she woke up. His protests were loud, angry, and laced with profanity. They were also ineffective. We had no idea what we would be walking into, and as tough as the former Marine had proven to be, he was still human. He would have been little more than a red-shirt out there, even more so once he had finished off his remaining forty-something rounds. He gave up when Rebecca threatened to Command him. At least this way he could pretend it was his choice, he had said.

Merov's... No, Rebecca's private elevator led down into a secluded area of the garage, complete with its own attendants. They stood at attention when the doors opened, not even questioning Rebecca's newfound authority. She led me out into a sea of luxurious excess.

There were at least thirty cars here, all of them washed, waxed, and primed for driving. They varied in size and shape, but I imagined none of them cost less than a hundred grand. They sat

arranged by type in two rows on either side of the main aisle, sports cars, sport utility vehicles, sedans, and even a few that I couldn't classify. Growing up in a city, I had never been a big car guy, but even the little bit I knew was enough to be impressed.

"We'll take the Rolls," Rebecca said to one of the attendants, an older vampire with long greying hair.

"Yes, mistress," he said, dashing off to get the car.

"It's not the fastest thing in here, but its armor-plated," she said.

I had a feeling we were going to need the protection. "How do they just know you're the boss?" I asked her. I could hear the heavy growl of the car's engine coming to life, and then I saw the headlights flick on.

"The transfer," she replied. "They can feel the shift the same way you did. They just understand it better."

"Have I told you how awesome I think you are," I said to her.

The car rumbled up to where we were standing and the attendant popped out. He held the driver's side door while the other one opened the passenger side.

"We'll settle that later," she said to me with a wink and a grin.

I wasn't one hundred percent sure what she meant, but it didn't sound bad. She tossed the blessed swords in the back seat and sank in behind the wheel while I circled around and hopped in on the other side, putting Boots' weapon with the others. The attendants slammed the doors shut, and with a slight squeal of tires and roar from the engine we were off.

"What time is it starting?" I asked when we pulled out of the parking garage and onto the street. It was almost ten o'clock, which made the otherwise insane Manhattan traffic almost bearable.

"I don't know," she replied. "It can't be too soon, or Merov would never have made it in time. I'm going to guess around one or two. It's a three hour drive."

I looked over at her, admiring the shape of her face in profile, her expression purposeful as she drove. I respected her for her strength and resolve, and for being so unequivocally willing to do this for an angel, her kind's mortal enemies, just because she knew it was important to me. What the beautiful creature driving the car saw in me, I had no idea, but for some reason she wanted to be with me, to be on my side. It was insane, but despite everything I was happier in that moment than I had ever been before.

"You should rest," she said. She snaked around the slower

moving traffic with practiced ease. “I think we’re going to need everything you’ve got.”

The truth was, I felt good. “What about you?” I asked. “I’ve never driven before, but once we get out onto the open road I’m sure I can figure it out.”

One eye pivoted to look at me, and she laughed. “We’ll be dead before we get there,” she said. “I’m fine. Between your blood and the transfer, I don’t think I’ll need to rest for a while.”

We rode in comfortable silence, the interior of the car impervious to outside noise. There was so much I wanted to ask her, about the transfer, about demons, about Reyzl. I couldn’t bring myself to do it. The moment of peaceful companionship was just too appealing. I kept my eyes out the window, watching all of the people who turned their heads to stare, who tried to see through the vehicle’s tinted glass. What would they think if they saw us as we were, a vampiress and the bastard son of the universe? An image of pitchforks was the first thing that came to mind.

It took us about half an hour to get out of Manhattan and onto the George Washington bridge. I could sense Rebecca tense up when the car eased out over the open expanse of water, then relax after we crossed it. She breathed out a deep sigh on the other side.

“What’s it like?” she asked me then.

“What’s what like?”

“To be a human. To be so inferior and weak.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Becca,” I said. Her head snapped to the right so she could look at me. “You don’t like being called Becca, do you?”

She tilted her head ever a tiny bit, smiled, then put her eyes back on the road. “It’s not that. I’ve never had anyone refer to me like that before. Like a friend.”

“I am your friend,” I told her. “It must be hard to have been ostracized by your people for thinking different. For trying to help them see the bigger picture.”

She stared straight ahead. “It has been lonely,” she admitted. “I never thought that I would achieve much more than being Merov’s laughable daughter or Reyzl’s toy. Even the scientists who were working on the synthetic... I know they thought the project was an eccentric waste.”

“Now you’re the boss though,” I said. “That has to count for something.”

Rebecca sighed again. “I wish it were that simple. The family will follow me because it’s our way, but I expect that I’ll be challenged quite often, at least in the beginning. At least until they see that I’m not someone to be taken lightly.”

I reached over and squeezed her shoulder. “Nobody will take you lightly. Merov was a serious monster, and you destroyed him.” She didn’t look too sure. “Anyway, I’ll be with you.”

The engine roared as she accelerated past an eighteen-wheeler, flipping off the driver on the way past. “Asshole,” she shouted into the cabin.

I doubted the sound would be able to penetrate the armored walls, but the simple normalcy of the gesture made me laugh.

“Being human isn’t much different than that,” I said. “You just do your best to have some fun, stay sane, not be lonely, and navigate around all the assholes. ”

She was thoughtful for a minute as if I had said something profound. “What about your family?” she asked. “Do you miss them?”

It occurred to me then that I hadn’t thought much about my family since returning from Purgatory. My mind wandered back to my mother, sitting in the kitchen reading a trashy romance novel and drinking tea. She had been a good enough mother, there for me when I needed her, a decent moral guide. It hadn’t been her fault I thought I was smarter than I was. She had supported me as best she could during the trial and my incarceration.

My father? He was there some of the time, gone the rest. He had popped back in and out of our lives a few times over the years, usually to have someplace to be when he couldn’t think of anywhere else. I didn’t know if he was even still alive. I had some extended family too, but I didn’t know any of them that well. It had just been my mother and me, and even so I wouldn’t say that I felt close to her.

“No,” I said after a long pause. “My mother is super religious. No offense, but I don’t think she’d approve of my choice of friends.”

We continued talking for the rest of the drive. It was simple, easy talk about everything and nothing. I learned about how she was raised, her first taste of fresh blood, how she came to be appalled by the way Merov killed humans so casually for food. I told her about my mortal childhood, my love of technology, my first kiss, the sadness I had felt when my dog Whisper had been hit

by a car when I was nine years old. We were new friends and old friends at the same time, keeping each other good company while we drove through the night towards an uncertain future. I took comfort in knowing that there was nobody else I would rather have headed towards oblivion with and that if oblivion did come at least I wouldn't end alone.

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I was looking out of the window, listening to Rebecca tell me about how she had come to live at the Statue of Liberty and marveling at the snowy landscape of the Catskill mountains when the darkness of the night was pierced by a blinding beam of white light off in the distance, shooting straight up into the sky. At the same instant, I felt a distinct unease in my gut, my soul reverberating in alarm.

"Do you see that?" I asked Rebecca.

She stopped talking and looked around. "I don't see anything," she replied.

"It's started," I told her. "There's a light shining out that way." I pointed into the woods. "If you can't see it, it's for angel eyes only, I guess."

"How far?"

"Five miles at least, maybe ten," I replied.

We had been slowed by the snow, which was at least three inches deep and counting. While it had provided for a beautiful visual distraction, it was costing us now.

"Can you go any faster?" I asked.

She put her foot down on the accelerator. I could hear the wheels spinning, fighting to find traction.

“Not if you want to stay on the road,” she said.

“Then let’s hope they can hold out,” I said.

Twenty minutes had passed by the time we reached a small, unpaved roadway marked by a small wooden sign that read ‘St. Francis Monastery’. I had kept my eyes on the beacon the entire time, and now I could see it down the road.

“That’s the place,” I said. “Turn here.”

Rebecca complied, putting us on a straight track towards the fight. There was still at least two or three miles left to travel through the snow covered woods, and the weather was getting worse. The snow was falling in such volume that we couldn’t see the road five feet in front of us. I focused on the light ahead and reached out with my senses, only to be crushed from the weight of so many demons concentrated in such a small area. We weren’t far away, but we would have to go in blind in every sense of the word.

“We’re close,” I told Rebecca, my head still pounding from the effort. There was a thump and a cry as we slammed into something dark that had been standing in the road.

“Scratch that, we’re here,” I said. A moment later, another thump, this one on the roof.

“I think we’ve been spotted,” she said. A bat like head peered down at me from the passenger side window. A clawed fist tried to punch through the glass, but the armor was too tough for it. I heard another thump, then another, as more demons spotted the car and leaped onto it.

“How do they know we’re not on their side?” I asked, trying to keep my voice somewhat calm.

“I don’t think they care,” Rebecca replied. “Now what?”

“Just keep driving,” I said. “We need to get to wherever the angels are.”

The demons on the car were pounding on the roof, on the windows. Another one landed on the hood, looking in at us and hissing. It reminded me of Reyzl’s messenger, but bigger.

“Scouts,” Rebecca said. “Their job would have been to gather info on the location, then back up when the stronger demons arrived. If Reyzl isn’t here, one of his lackeys will be. He’ll be Commanding them, and holding open the Rift.”

“Rift? Is that what it sounds like?”

“Yes. It’s a passageway to and from Hell. Get off!” She cursed as two more demons slammed into the side of the car, almost sending us into spin. “There are hundreds of types of demons. Most are big, ugly, mean, and dumb, like the grunts at the Belmont. The higher order demons create them to fight, but they can’t organize without being Commanded, and they don’t have the power to travel a Rift on their own. You’ll find some strays once in awhile, but for the most part they remain in Hell.”

It was a weird time to be having this conversation, but she wouldn’t have been telling me this stuff if it weren’t important. The outer shell of the car was a cacophony of hammer blows as the smaller demons tried to break through. I could see the beacon clearly now, a laser thread of light that reached up into eternity. We were almost there.

“So what about the weres, and the nosferatu, or Reyzl for that matter?” I asked her. “You reproduce like mortals, have families, loyalties, the whole deal.”

Rebecca’s face was a mask of concentration, fighting to keep the car under control. I was impressed with her ability to multi-task.

“God created man,” she said. “When he gave Hell to the Devil, the Devil wanted to one up him and to thwart his designs. He started creating his own vision of mankind, one that was not so... Constrained. His early efforts were fruitless, after all he’s not God, but in time he found limited success. The problem was that his creations still required God’s original touch of life, and so the demons such as nosferatu required human blood to survive. Our story has grown and evolved much the same as man. We have lived secretly in parallel and worked to claim for our own whatever God and man have built. No demon can stay here indefinitely without feeding on a human, or feeding on a demon that has fed on a human. We all need God’s seed to survive.”

“Or some badass technology,” I said. “Synthetic blood to replace the touch of God?”

“Stem cells,” she said. “Even the synthetic uses human blood, we just manufacture it ourselves. One day maybe we’ll be able to make it fast enough we won’t need any synthetic materials, but that day is a long way off.”

We were within a mile of our destination, and the number of demons assaulting the car was reaching ridiculousness. How Rebecca was managing to keep the vehicle under control with so

many of the things pounding against it was a feat beyond understanding. Finally, she skidded the car to a stop.

“We’re close enough,” she growled. The angel light was burning up the sky now, and I could tell that it was originating from the center of a large stone building. Even with the illumination from the light visibility still sucked, the snowfall creating a whiteout across the entire area.

Rebecca reached behind the seat and grabbed the swords. She handed me mine with a smile, and then her eyes clouded over, and the smile grew longer and more frightening. The car began to rock. The demons covering it were able to get a better purchase now that it wasn’t moving. She reached for the door handle.

“Hold on,” I said. “How much do you like this car?”

“I can get another,” she replied.

“Just what I wanted to hear,” I told her. “The air’s going to get a little weird in here."

I looked down at my feet and focused my will, pulling cold air in through the ventilation system, packing it into the cabin and compressing it. I could feel the pressure building as I did so, pushing in on us and making it hard to breathe. The demons continued to rock the car, and a claw managed to sneak in through the seam of the driver’s side door.

My head was a melon ready to explode from the intense pressure. Rebecca was moaning, unable to handle the discomfort any longer. The inhale complete, I pushed out the exhale, forcing the air to expand around us.

The air exited at supersonic speed, ripping apart the Rolls Royce and sending its pieces exploding outward. The demons that had been assaulting the car were shredded by the power of the blast, their bodies pulled apart by the decompressing air and fragments of steel. In the distance, I could hear more cries of pain as the bullets found other soft flesh to dig into. The frame of the car was all that remained, with us sitting in the center.

If Rebecca was impressed, she didn’t show it. She was all business. “The Commander will be near the center of the assault, ringed with the strongest of the demons,” she said. “Unless he brought a second, killing him will cause the less intelligent to lose cohesiveness and start fighting with one another.”

“Got it. Are you ready?” I asked.

She responded with a wink, and then disappeared into the snow.

I didn't waste any time following after her.

"This way," she said, leading me at a slight angle away from the light. "I can smell them. The main force is already inside."

We ran about a thousand feet, passing pieces of the Rolls and disintegrating parts of demons. The snow was well packed here, trampled by hundreds of claws. I could hear the sound of steel, the roar of monsters. A fourteen foot mass of muscle appeared out of nowhere, throwing a huge ham fist right at me. I dove to the side and rolled to my feet just in time to see Rebecca leap upwards and decapitate it with one smooth stroke. The somewhat humanoid head landed at my feet, its patchy black hair matted with blood.

"Trolls," she said, kicking the head away. "They're too big to go inside."

"I'm glad you aren't," I told her. We went another hundred feet or so before we came across the first dead angel.

He had long blonde hair, delicate features, and a smooth, boyish face. He was lying in blood-soaked snow, one wing torn from his body, his skin marbleized by the black demon poison that had felled him. He wore a pair of white linen pants, his chest and feet bare. He had died recently enough that he hadn't yet turned to dust, and his blood steamed against the cold snow. I stood there smoldering until Rebecca pulled me away.

"Come on, Landon," she said. "There are still some that we can save."

And plenty of demons left to kill. As if on cue, another troll charged in through the veil of snow. Before Rebecca could react, I leaped forward at the creature, digging my sword deep into its chest and using it as a springboard to bounce away. It all happened too fast for the demon to follow, and it stopped and grabbed at its wound with a look of confusion before toppling to the ground.

"Lead on," I said.

Our pace slowed as we moved in closer to the Monastery, the entire grounds heavy with demons. "Fodder," Rebecca had called them. They were weak demons whose role was to harass and distract the defenders while trying to overwhelm them with their numbers and get in a lucky hit that would break the skin and allow entry to their poison. They were simple humanoid creatures, five feet tall, skeletal frames with clawed hands and feet, and skin that lay taut against sinewy muscle and bone. It was like they had taken a human being, flayed it, and shrink-wrapped it with a new skin.

There were hundreds of them still wandering about outside in search of more enemies to attack. They hooted when they saw us coming, bringing even more of their brethren to the scene. They dropped like flies. Even with my non-existent skill at swordplay they were too slow to be a threat to us.

"Landon, behind you," Rebecca shouted. I didn't turn to look, but instead bent my knees and launched myself into the air, shooting up and over the troll's fist as it smashed into the ground where I had been standing. It was becoming a favorite tactic of mine since I had tried it with the gargoyles. It allowed me to both evade attack and also get a better perspective on the attacker and my surroundings.

The troll looked at me as I reached the apex of my ascent, pulling back his fist and throwing it upwards. He was faster than the others had been, and I scrambled to get my sword up in time to block the incoming ball of demonic muscle. He didn't hit me dead on, but even so the impact sent me flying.

I crashed on the ground twenty feet away, just in time to see Rebecca decapitate the troll while it was trying to gauge my descent. I jumped to my feet to sidestep a clumsy lunge by a fodder demon and plant my sword in its back, then drop under another blow and bring the blade back around and through the head of the second demon. I had dispatched six more by the time Rebecca got over to me.

"How much further?" I asked her. I could hear more demons heading our way, the shaking ground a cue that it wasn't just more fodder. "We're losing too much time out here."

Rebecca didn't seem to mind all the fighting. In fact, she looked radiant in her adrenaline stoked attack mode. The melting snow had caused her hair to stick to her face in an alluring way, and her well-worn henley was clinging to the outline of her form.

"Agreed," she said. "We need to get inside."

We hurried the rest of the way to the Monastery, slowing only when the chasing demons caught up to us. The trolls were the most difficult, their size allowing them to outrun the fodder, but we were fortunate that there was no strategy to their attack, and no cooperation. For all of their brute power, we were just flat out superior.

The Monastery entrance was a plain human-sized wooden door affixed to the center of a long, high stone wall that comprised the

south side of the building. According to Rebecca's inherited memory, it had been constructed in the nineteen fifties to resemble a fourteenth century monastic retreat, complete with a total absence of windows and no electricity, and therefore lots and lots of candles. The idea was that this type of environment would keep the monks focused on God and prayer because there was nothing else to look at or do. What she hadn't known was why the angels were using it since they tended to prefer wide, open spaces to small, dark containment; the precise environment that most demons preferred.

The door had already been torn apart, and it lay on the ground ten feet away. Scattered around the entrance were the remains of a bloody and violent battle, with a large number of half-decayed fodder and trolls littering the area along with at least three or four angels. Since the Divine lost their physical manifestations so soon after being destroyed, I was judging the outcome based on how many blessed swords I found discarded.

"The monks were Touched warriors," Rebecca reminded me when I commented on my system.

"Their bodies would still be here," I countered. I knew she was trying to help alleviate my concern for Josette, and I appreciated it, but I was going to worry until we found her.

"Not if the demons took them off to consume them," Rebecca said. I hadn't thought about that outcome, and it did give me a little bit of macabre peace. "We'll be safe from the outer demons once we're inside. They would have entered already if they hadn't been Commanded not to."

We came across some of the monks on the other side of the door, in a small foyer that had contained some kind of mechanism with seraph-scripted spikes. The spikes were covered in blood, but the apparatus that had held them was smashed to pieces, leaving them scattered among the casualties - three Touched monks who had been assigned to work the trap, and a number of decayed fodder corpses. A heavy stone door had lain on the other side of the room, but the intruders had managed to obliterate it. Beyond the door, the hallway split in three directions.

"Which way?" I asked Rebecca.

The inside of the building was almost silent. The scrape of claws and the occasional echoed howl were the only indication that there was anything in here at all. There was no sound of battle, no hint of angels fighting demons, and that was bad. Were we too late? Had

the battle already been lost?

"They split off," she replied. "They're here to kill everything they find."

Which way then? I hated to split up, but we didn't have a choice. "Okay, take the left, I'll go straight, and let's hope the right corridor is a dud."

"Landon," Rebecca said, reaching out and grabbing my arm. "We can't. Even with the transfer, I'm not powerful enough to take on a major demon on my own. I'm not sure you are either."

She had a point. I had seen her do so much damage with so little effort I had forgotten that there were demons out there that could eat us for breakfast. "You're right. We'll go to the left."

The corridor was dark, lit by candles that sat in plain iron sconces along the walls. There was a small door every ten feet or so which led into simple eight foot by eight foot rooms that reminded me of prison cells, outfitted with just a small bed and a toilet. The doors had been torn off every single one of the rooms we passed. Some were empty, but the others? The others were a gruesome scene of blood splattered walls, decaying demons and half-eaten corpses. When we came upon demons that were still feeding, we destroyed them and moved on.

We continued down the hallway. A rhythmic thumping sound began reverberating through the walls. It was a steady pounding, every four or five seconds, a huge THUMP that shook mortar from the stone construction. There was no other sound now, wherever the demons were they no longer seemed to be on the move. We hadn't seen evidence of angels in any of the rooms, which was a good thing. We didn't know where they were though, and that was a bad thing.

"They must have locked themselves in the chapel," Rebecca said after considering the banging. "We may be out of time." I started running, and she followed.

My pace was reckless, but in the moment I didn't care. The balance of power was already in Hell's favor, and every angel that died gave them a stronger foothold. I hadn't helped the cause any earlier, and that drove me even harder to want to ensure that no more seraphs were destroyed. We happened along a few demon stragglers as we ran, and I tore through them without slowing, Rebecca staying close behind.

The split corridors seemed to reconnect at the back end of the

Monastery, then turn inward to the central part of the building. Following the layout brought us to one more heavy door frame that had lost its thick wooden door, and beyond it a dining hall. It was here that the demons remained, pounding at a gigantic, ornately decorated door that was covered top to bottom in seraphim writing.

"Now what?" I whispered to Rebecca.

We had taken position outside the dining room, peeking in from the doorway. There were at least a hundred demons gathered inside - a whole bunch of fodder, a handful of weres, a couple of dog-like creatures I hadn't seen before, four female demons that Rebecca whispered were harpies, and the main power players, seven fallen angels.

The angels were the ones pounding the door, standing in a circle with their arms held up, and wings spread, a blue flame dancing in the center of a pentagram they had scratched into the stone floor. The flame would grow and congeal, and a ball of energy would launch out and slam against the barrier, rocking it back and forth. A return flash of lightning-like defensive energy would lash into the angels, burning and tearing at their bodies, which would heal before the next attack and counterattack. Each of them was wearing an amulet around their neck, negating the effectiveness of the angels' last line of defense.

"Do you see the angel closest to the door, the one with the short black hair?" Rebecca asked.

I looked to the figure she had described. Like the others, he was shirtless, wearing only a pair of cloth pants cinched by a simple rope belt. His entire upper body was covered in ragged tattooed sigils, and his wings had been dyed black with red at the tips that made them look like they were dripping blood.

"That's Lazar," she said. "He'll be Commanding the fodder and the hounds. If we can take him out we may be able to cause enough confusion to disable the other angels before they can recover."

"That's the plan?" I asked. "Why don't I just tap dance in there naked? That would be an easier distraction."

Rebecca bared her fangs in a twisted smile. "And a much more attractive one," she replied. "But I think the only demon that would be distracted is me."

I was able to be embarrassed despite our predicament. I could feel my face turn red. The hallway shook as another blast of energy slammed into the doorway. I looked over at it and noticed there

was a small crack beginning to form in the upper left corner. We were running out of time.

I looked back at Rebecca, who was waiting for me to tell her what to do. Her face was fearsome beauty, framed to perfection by the flickering candles behind her. The flickering candles.

"Do fallen angels hate fire as much as heavenly ones?" I asked.

"Hell isn't all fire and brimstone," she said. "Of course they do."

It was the most ambitious demand I had ever made, and Dante's words were in my mind as I focused. "Bending the universe too much can have catastrophic consequences," he had written. I didn't know if I had the power to do this, but I was out of time and feeling desperate. I put my arm around Rebecca and whispered into her ear. "Hold on tight, and don't move."

The sound was something like a jet-propelled freight train; an oncoming wave of destruction and power that shook the Monastery with such force that I feared it might collapse. It started with a low rumble at the entrance to the structure, but built momentum in no time as I pulled and pulled on the air and the heat, bringing them to me in a gigantic combustible package.

The demons heard it coming too, but they didn't understand they were under attack, and couldn't understand how. They raised their heads to listen but stayed gathered in the dining hall while the fallen angels continued their assault.

They screamed in surprise when the flood of pure flame exploded into the room, filling it in moments with searing heat. The summoned demons were immune, but the weres were vaporized in an instant, and the angels cried out in pain and dropped their own attack while their flesh burned and healed and burned again.

I held Rebecca close to me in a bubble of air that I was holding the flood of flame away from. "Wait here," I told her. "You'll die if you go out there."

She hadn't realized what I planned to do, and her eyes shifted back to blue and begged me not to do it. "Landon, you can't survive. You won't heal fast enough," she said.

"Maybe, maybe not. If I do nothing, I'm guaranteed to fail." I kissed her on the cheek, let go, and stepped out into the fire.

The pain was intense. My skin started burning, and my clothes combusted away to dust in an instant. I pushed my body to heal faster, creating a constant battle of burn and cleanse on my own flesh. My eyes were burning blind, so I had to rely on my senses to

see where my enemies were.

I would hit Lazar first, and then the other angels. My hand had melted to the handle of my sword, making it an almost cyborg-like extension. I broke into a run, dashing through the flames, my mind a volatile mixture of pain, calm, chaos, desperation, love, and anger.

I demanded my eyes to heal as I approached the angels, opening them just in time to see Lazar standing in front of me, his body flaming like a Burning Man, fear registering on his face to see me coming at him. He had no time to move before his head was severed clean from his body, the amulet slipping off his neck when the carcass tumbled to the ground. I was standing right in front of the angels' door now, and I spun around, took a deep breath, and dropped the firestorm, the recession sucking all of the oxygen from the room.

My face was a twisted wreck of pain and glory. I shattered Boot's sword into six deadly shards and sent them darting forward through the six angels' crystal amulets, through the six angels' necks. The blood of the Grail lost, their demon-turned bodies couldn't recover from the damage of the blades.

I slumped to the ground, the world around me turning fuzzy. I struggled to stay awake, noticing a female shape moving towards me, vaguely understanding that it wasn't Rebecca and that I should defend myself. How could I defend myself? I had destroyed my sword. I had liked that sword too.

A clawed hand raked across my cheek, sending me flopping to the floor. The harpy jumped on me, her white fangs a stark contrast against ebony skin. She had a knife in her other hand. I should get her off me. I should do something.

There was an angry hiss, and then her head rolled forward and landed behind me, her body kicked away before it could cover me in blood. Rebecca stood above me, her expression worried despite her empty black eyes. I heard a growl, and then she fell backward, a huge mass of muscle pouncing on her.

Focus. How could I focus? Everything was moving like mud. Like lightning. My eyes wouldn't stay straight. My head hurt. Rebecca needed me. I struggled to push myself to a sitting position. Rebecca was wrestling with the hellhound, its jaws snapping at her face, her arms at full extension to hold it back. More demons were coming, more of the harpies and another hound. I knew there was

another hound.

The angels' massive door began to open, sending a spreading ray of light into the room. I was still lying right in front of it, and it was so bright on the other side. In the doorway was a silhouette. An angel. Its eyes met mine. I knew this one. Josette.

She launched from the doorway like a rocket, her sword coming down on the hound lunging towards me. I hadn't seen it, would never have been able to stop it. Another angel came out of the door, then another. They assaulted the remaining demons. Josette was at my side.

"Fellow, I did not expect to see you again, much less find you here," she said.

She was an ethereal sight in a simple long white gown and sandals. She knelt and put her hand on my forehead. The world began to clarify. The other angels were dispatching the second hound, and now they were attacking Rebecca?

"No," I cried, reaching out for anything I could and sending it banging into the angels. It distracted them enough to allow her to duck around them and run towards us.

"Don't hurt her," I said to Josette. I didn't know if she could or not, but she had six hundred or so years on the vampire, so I assumed she could.

"This one is yours?" she asked, confused. She floated to her feet and held her hand up to the angels. "Stand down," she said to them.

Rebecca reached my feet and turned. She hadn't been running from them, but running to reach me, to protect me from them. She hissed when they approached.

"Stand down," Josette repeated, placing herself between the angels and Rebecca. The angels pulled up. One was older, his hair long and grey, his bare chest lined with scars. The other was younger, with a fresh face and delicate features. He reminded me of the angel I had found dead in the snow.

"Josette," the older one said. "We've discussed this."

Josette was agitated. "We have done no such thing," she said. "This man has come here to help us, and you would destroy him and his companion?"

The seraph glowered. "He is no man, Josette. He is a diuscrucis. You know the laws. You have agreed to abide by them."

They were talking to each other like Rebecca and I weren't even there. As if they could just decide to kill us and make it so. As if we

couldn't resist. I tried to stand, my legs shaky. Rebecca caught me before I could fall.

“Look at him,” Josette said. “Man, diuscrucis, whatever he is, he just about killed himself to save us. I did not agree to return such benevolence with violence, regardless of our laws. The law is short-sighted and flawed if that is how it is intended to be interpreted.”

The comment infuriated the angel. “How dare you,” he cried, the power of his voice shaking the Monastery further, and causing Josette to shy away. “Do you still not understand?” he continued, his voice back to a normal volume. “After all of the time we have spent over the last three days speaking of such things? The life a diuscrucis saves today is the life it barters for power tomorrow. That is their history, that is their truth.”

I didn’t appreciate being called ‘it’, and I didn’t appreciate being judged on someone else’s merits.

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to get into the conversation. The younger angel looked at me, but the elder was preoccupied with browbeating Josette.

“How do you know they are the same?” Josette asked. “What if you are wrong? Moses, the demons almost broke into our sanctuary! You know what that means. The sanctuary is more important than my life or yours. Landon is a savior.”

It must have been a bad choice of words because the older angel, Moses, looked ready to tear Josette apart with his bare hands. He raised his sword in front of his face. It was different than the others, older, larger, and simpler. It looked more like a medieval broadsword, and it had few runes along its surface.

“Josette, don’t make me do this,” he said, his voice heavy with regret. “You have been granted clemency for your years of loyal and honorable service to our Lord. Please do not turn your back on His forgiveness, on His love. No matter what this diuscrucis does today if we allow him to survive he will be our destruction, as his predecessor almost was. Please.”

His eyes pleaded with her to join them on their side. Josette looked at me, hanging from Rebecca’s arm. I was only conscious because she had shared her energy with me.

“Josette, it’s okay,” I told her. “Just let the vampire go,” I said to Moses. “She is little threat to you.”

He looked at me, his face empty of emotion. “No demon will leave this Monastery,” he said.

In that moment I realized why Heaven was having such a hard time. It was so ordered, so unbending. It couldn't adjust. Good was white, and evil was black, end of discussion. Now Josette was caught in the middle because she dared to see gray.

"I'm sorry," Josette said, still looking at me. Tears poured from her eyes. She stepped away from us, and towards Moses.

"The Lord will forgive me for he knows my true heart," she said to Moses. She pulled her sword from the ether and held it out before her. "I do not wish to fight you Moses, but I will not allow you to slaughter those who have done you no harm, and in fact have saved your life. The only perfect being is God, and He did not write this law. We did. I challenge its validity according to the rights bestowed upon me by my consecration."

Moses took a deep breath and sighed. "Your rights were lost when you Confessed. You know that. You cannot make a formal challenge for seven years. Please do not do this."

Josette cast one last glance back at us. "You have given me no choices," she said to Moses, her voice filled with sadness. "I will not let you kill them."

"Then that is your choice," he replied.

He wielded the broadsword as if it were a toothpick, holding the massive blade one handed, cutting and slashing with speed, grace, and precision. Josette danced around the older angel, her body a blur as she twirled and twisted away from the sword. She didn't make any effort to fight back, at least not yet, her size giving her a distinct advantage on the defense.

The younger angel approached us. He handed me a simple white linen robe, which reminded me of my nakedness.

"Thank you," I said, sliding it on over my head. I was sure Rebecca had noticed me. What did she think about what she had seen? Why did it matter so much?

"My brother," the angel said. "He was outside."

I knew the angel had looked familiar. I shook my head. "I'm sorry," I said.

"I believe you," he replied. He paused to think. "You will help us?"

I nodded. "I'll help you until the balance is restored. After that, I make no promises."

"Then let us hope Josette wins," he said. "For I am willing to take my chances."

The battle was still raging, Josette and Moses continuing their angry dance. Josette had joined the fight in full, adding her weapon to the mix. Their swords were silver rays of light, whistling through the air, crashing into one another, throwing up a shower of sparks. It was impossible to say who was the better fighter, impossible to guess what the outcome would be. The rage shared between them was obvious, their mutual dislike apparent. In a way, it was good to know that even the warriors of God were not immune to such emotions. As Josette had said, they were not perfect.

For every bit of strength the older angel possessed, Josette made up for in agility. The huge broadsword came in at her from every conceivable angle and speed, followed by a foot, a fist, or a knee, and she would dip and dodge and parry without breaking stride, without making a mistake. Moses pressed the attack hard to keep her on the defensive, like he knew that once she had a moment to breathe, she would overtake him.

Just when it seemed as though the fight would continue forever, that is exactly what happened, and a moment later it was over. Moses reached out a little too far, a little too high, and left himself a little too off-balance. Josette pounced on the opening like a cat, springing forward and planting her sword in his stomach and pushing him over with the weight she bore down on it. He hit the earth hard, Josette straddling him like a surfboard, holding the blade in position to prevent him from continuing the fight.

“Yield,” she demanded.

Moses coughed and glared up at her. “You are making a mistake Josette,” he said. “I will not yield.”

She twisted the sword, leading the older angel to wince in pain. “You have lost. Yield, and we will leave this place. The sanctuary will remain safe.”

“I will not yield,” Moses yelled.

He grabbed Josette’s sword by the blade and threw it out of his body, sending the slight angel tumbling backward. His hands trailing blood, he pounced on her, wrapping his arms around her neck. Josette struggled under his weight, her arms flailing. She sought to gain leverage to get him off, finding it difficult on the blood-slicked floor. Sickened, I pushed against Rebecca, trying to find the strength to come to her aid.

“This is their fight,” Rebecca said, holding me in place. “You cannot intervene.” I stopped squirming.

“I’m sorry Josette,” Moses whispered, barely loud enough for me to hear. Her laboring had ceased, and I wasn’t even sure she was still alive. That was when I noticed the knife.

It was a demon’s blade, obsidian and serrated. It was lying just on the outside of the pentagram that had been scratched into the floor, near a pile of decayed ash that had once been a fallen angel. Josette’s hand was inching towards it, trying to get a hold on it without drawing Moses’ attention. It seemed surreal that it would come down to this, a scene that had been played out in movies that was happening now for real. I focused on the blade, and with the little energy I had left I pushed it, an inch or less. It was enough.

Josette’s fingers wrapped around the handle, and she jerked the blade up and into the back of Moses’ shoulder, burying it deep in his flesh. He cried out in shock and pain, giving her the chance she needed to get her arms under his chest and shove him away. He landed on his feet, pure animosity pouring from him. Josette staggered to a stand.

“How could you?” Moses cried, his bare chest already beginning to show signs of the poison. He turned to the younger angel. “Thomas, holy water.”

Thomas raced back through the doorway into the room Josette had referred to as the sanctuary. Josette walked over to the stricken seraph.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her eyes were wet with tears.

“You should be,” Moses said. He spat blood at her feet. “Your soul is tainted Josette. Since you met this crossbred demon-spawn you have lost your way. Do you think he is the solution to our problems? Do you think he deserves to live while I die?”

His anger turned Josette’s sorrow into an equal rage. Her voice boomed in the gigantic room. “No one deserves to die for no reason other than being.” She pointed at Rebecca. “Not even a demon.”

Thomas returned from the sanctuary, racing by us to deliver the holy water to Moses. The older angel’s’ poison was spreading, but he remained strong enough to continue his vitriol.

“You are filth Josette, a sorry excuse for a servant of the Lord. You turn your back on Him because you don’t trust in His plan. You should be grateful to Him, for showing mercy on you after what you did with your own brother.”

It was as though in that moment all of time and space came to a screeching halt. Thomas hit the skids, stopping a good ten feet away

from Moses and Josette, his eyes like saucers in response to the elder seraph's words. Josette's face drained of all color, and a frightening darkness flashed in her eyes. I remembered what Josette had told me about her brother. I could piece together what she hadn't. The vampires had thought she was a virgin, and in a sense she was, but for their intents they were wrong.

Josette wrenched the demonic blade from Moses' back and without hesitation reinserted it into his heart. She pulled it back out, and stabbed him again, and again, and again, the fury of her hurt, guilt, and shame overcoming all other rational thought, overwhelming her spirit of goodness. She sobbed as she punctured him, over and over, brought to a stop only when Thomas grabbed her from behind and held her to him with her back pressed up against his chest. Moses coughed up some blood, his face cracking with poisoned veins, and passed without another word.

"Josette," Thomas whispered, trying to calm her. "Josette, please it's me, Thomas." She flailed and fought, trying to break away, to continue her assault on the now empty form. "Josette."

I looked at Rebecca and motioned with my head. "We have to help her," I said.

Rebecca helped me walk over to Josette. Her face was feral, her growls incomprehensible. I reached out and put my hand under her chin, making sure her eyes were in line with mine.

"Josette," I said, my voice as soft and warm as I could make it. "It's Landon. It's okay. You're going to be okay."

I sank my gaze into her eyes, searching for her in them. She was seeing right through me, blinded by her pain. I leaned in and kissed her forehead. In response, a whine poured from her lips, a flat, straight, painful, powerful sound that felt as though it had her whole existence wrapped up in it. It continued for uncounted minutes, her sorrow heartbreaking. When it tailed off, she collapsed into me, and I lowered her to the floor.

"What have I done?" she said. "Oh Landon, what have I done?"

I lowered myself next to her and put my arms around her. "You saved my life," I told her. "Mine and Rebecca's."

She squeezed my shoulder. "For that I am glad, but the cost was so high."

"Moses?" I asked her.

"No," she said, pulling back away from me. She looked up at me, and I understood.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. It wasn’t the pair of light, golden, heavenly eyes I had been so mesmerized by looking back at me. They were different now, changed, a simple brown that could have passed as human.

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“I don’t understand,” I said. “How could this happen?”

We had moved from the center of the room closer to the sanctuary door. We were all sitting on the floor. Josette was propped up against my shoulder. She looked worn, beaten, and tired.

“She used a demon’s blade against another angel,” Thomas said.

“He was going to kill her,” Rebecca replied. “She had every right to defend herself. Is it her fault that the demon’s dagger was the closest means to do so?”

“It does not matter,” Thomas said. “The laws do not make circumstantial exceptions.”

“Maybe they should,” I said, unable to disguise my disgust.

Josette shifted on my arm to look at me. “Landon, do not be concerned.” Her brown eyes were taking time to get used to. They looked so ordinary. She turned her attention to Thomas. “Our Lord knows my heart. He has cast me down as He must, for His rules are not arbitrary, yet He has not cast me to evil. My heart is not filled with hate. Perhaps He may allow me to earn my redemption.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“True fallen angels are demons,” Thomas said. “They are the angels that have been seduced by evil and have committed one or more of the seven sins with selfishness in their heart. Josette is not a demon, yet also not an angel. I do not know what she is, for I have never heard of such a thing.”

“No angel has ever killed another without a self-serving motivation,” Josette said.

“In all this time?” I asked. “That seems hard to believe.”

“Why would it be?” Thomas replied. “Angels cannot kill one another with anything but a demon’s blade. An angel using such a weapon is unheard of unless it is obtained with the intent to harm. Such premeditation is always self-serving.”

“What does it mean to fall?” Rebecca asked.

Josette cast her gaze to the floor. “I can no longer reach Heaven,” she said. “I cannot return there. Maybe one day, but not now. My spirit is broken, cracked. I can feel the loss in my soul, and yet I feel alive. It is a different alive, but it still is.”

“You must be of Purgatory now,” Thomas said. “The place between.”

Josette was silent. Then she stood and walked over to Rebecca. “Cut my wrist,” she said, holding out her arm. Rebecca looked at me. “Do it,” Josette insisted.

Rebecca reached out and ran her fingernail along Josette’s wrist. Her blood began to well up through the cut, a thin stream of it pooling and dripping down onto the floor. No black veins of poison formed around the wound, but it didn’t heal either. Josette looked at it in amazement before Rebecca reached down and tore a piece of cloth off the bottom of Josette’s dress and wrapped it around the cut.

The fallen angel looked at the demon with tears in her eyes, nodded thanks, and approached Thomas, her other wrist held out. He didn’t wait for her to ask. He took his sword and pressed it into her flesh, just enough to cause her to bleed. Again, the blood dripped to the floor, and the wound did not heal.

“Mortal,” she said. “*I’m mortal.* ” Her lips didn’t move the second time, but I heard her voice in my mind.

“*No* ,” I said, projecting the words. She snapped her head around to look at me. “*Your power has shifted to this world, to Purgatory, to me.* ” I was trying to be comforting. I failed.

“No,” Josette said aloud, her voice bitter. “I am not like you. I wish to be a seraph. I wish to fight for good, for God. You are kind Landon, but you will do what you must to be what you are. I must also be what I am, regardless of what has happened. I will help you against the demons, against Reyzl. I will not do evil for any purpose.”

“I don’t expect you to, and would never ask it of you,” I replied. “If I can help you be restored, I will.” I turned to Thomas, so serene despite losing his brother to the attack. “What about you? We have a few openings we’re looking to fill.”

“I am sorry diuscrucis, but I cannot. I am the only angel left to guard the sanctuary.”

I looked over to the gigantic door that the demons had been trying to obliterate. It bore the scar of war, a crack that ran from the top corner down towards the center. It was open just enough, but behind it I could see a bright light, the beacon, reaching up through a hole in ceiling. I could also see an altar and pews, as well as racks of swords lined up against the wall.

“What is the sanctuary?” I asked.

“It is a conduit between this world and Heaven,” Josette said. “The light is a beacon which draws us...” She bit her lip. “Draws angels to it, so when they are moving between the planes they do not get lost. An experienced seraph can travel without a conduit, but the novices need the light to find their way. “

“You said Heaven wasn’t up, but the light stretches out into the sky,” I said.

“It’s a side effect,” she replied. “The beam passes from this plane to the next and reflects upward as a result.”

“Without the sanctuary and others like it, we would not be able to reinforce our numbers,” Thomas said. ”The demon Reyzl was hoping to capture it, to slaughter the angels coming into this world, or to destroy it. Thanks to you, he was unsuccessful.”

“It is also a place of healing,” Josette explained. “The light can purge demon poison more effectively than holy water. The light can also help us... angels regain themselves when they are tempted by evil.”

“You mean Confession?”

Josette nodded. “Yes. After I left you the other morning, I came here. I was conflicted by my dealings with you, and I sought clarity. I had intended to meditate, but when I told Moses about what had

happened, he believed that you had tainted my mind. He brought his concerns to the other Elders, and they insisted that I step into the light and Confess. I was compelled to tell them everything." Her eyes began to tear up again as she recalled the experience. "Things that I had never told anyone, things that I had denied for myself. He used my worst pain against me." Her tears were flowing again, and I was going to comfort her, but Rebecca beat me to it. She took Josette in her arms and held her close.

"Yet they call me the demon," she said. Josette pulled away and looked up at her.

"You may bear the mark of the Devil," she said, "But you have embraced the freedom of choice granted to you and used it to forge your own path."

"Josette," Thomas said, placing his hand on her shoulder. She turned to face him. "I am sorry for the actions of Brother Moses, he had no right to treat you as he did. He was not the same since the betrayal."

"Thank you, Thomas," she replied. "You and your brother are two of the finest fellows I have had the pleasure of knowing. I understand what happened to Moses when Charis betrayed us, but this quest for vengeance has led many astray. I believe that our Lord has a plan for me, and that this is a part of it. I do feel the pain of this loss, and I long to see my home again, but I believe in His wisdom."

I listened to Josette speak with a new respect for her. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to dedicate so much of my existence to something only to be discarded for holding fast to the same morals and beliefs that had brought me there. It was amazing to me that she held no ill will towards God for his abandonment. She believed that what He had done was right and that He held some grand design for all of us. I didn't get it or believe it, but I respected her unwavering faith. Our work here was done though, and we needed to get back to the city.

"Thomas," I said. "I don't suppose you have a car?"

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An angel had no need for a car, but a Touched warrior monk did. They needed to eat after all, and somebody had to make runs for groceries. The car was a powder blue 1970 Chevy Suburban, a beast of a vehicle that had been well maintained by the monks, and came equipped with its own snowplow. Despite its age and lack of interior creature comforts, it was a more solid performer than the Rolls Royce had been in the crappy mountain weather we had driven into.

As Rebecca had predicted, losing their Commander had caused the Rift, wherever it had been, to close, and the demons that were summoned from Hell couldn't survive long here, especially in the cold. We did come across a few of the scouts as we headed back down the Monastery's long driveway, but none of them looked like they had much more time to exist.

Rebecca and Josette were in the front of the car, with Rebecca behind the wheel. I was exhausted from the battle, and they had both insisted that I do my best to shut my eyes and recharge my batteries. I was so weak I hadn't even had the energy to change the

simple white robe into something a little less drafty, and my head was spinning soon after I laid it down on the long rear bench seat.

The vampire and the angel, Josette might have fallen but I still thought of her as an angel, were both silent, lost in their own thoughts as we drove. All three of us had gone through some major personal stuff in the last twenty-four hours, and we all needed a chance to do the mental computations. In an effort to create a calming environment, Rebecca had found a classical music eight track in the glove compartment. I fell asleep to either Bach or Mozart. I always got them confused.

I wasn't surprised when I found myself back at my Source. As my mind had succumbed to the soothing sounds of the symphony I could feel my soul calling out to my consciousness, pulling it into this place. I was standing inside the Museum of Natural History, right in the spot where I had died. I don't know how I knew it was the spot, because the whole area was under reconstruction, nearly ready for re-opening post –'terrorist' attack. Ancient Egyptian artifacts, sculpture and jewelry and dioramas with paper mache pyramids and little plastic Egyptians surrounded me. There was a shadowy figure standing in the corner.

"Ulnyx," I said, beckoning the Great Were to step into the light. He did so without hesitation, his will broken by my own. "Do you know why I'm here, of all places?"

The demon's hair was gone, replaced with a smooth bald scalp. He had traded in the rock star look for something more upscale, a tight black suit, and a shiny blue tie.

"That's where it started," he said, motioning at the spot I was standing on.

"Where I died," I said.

"Yes sir," he replied. "Your power has grown, but you still aren't ready yet."

"Ready for what?"

He smiled. "You know what. You can't win that fight, not yet. You haven't let go."

"Enough riddles Ulnyx. Let go of what?" I looked at him, and he dropped to his knees.

"I would tell you if I could," he said. "It's not something you can be told. You just have to do it."

I walked over to him and knelt down so we would be at eye level. "Tell me," I commanded, shouting right in his face. He didn't

react.

"I'm sorry sir."

I got back to my feet and looked around the room. I was supposed to let go of something, but what? I had accepted who I was, and why I was. I was comfortable with my role in this fight. What else did I have to do, or prove, or think? I had died here, in this room. It had something to do with that.

Just beyond the spot where my body had landed was the main exhibit space, where the Chalice had been before the Demon Queen had claimed it. I half-expected to see the Grail sitting there in its tamper-proof, bulletproof case, mocking my ability to locate it. Instead, there was a large block draped by a blue velvet blanket. Was it part of the new exhibit? It looked out of place with the other Egyptian artifacts.

I walked over to the block and took hold of the drape, pulling it off so I could see what was underneath. I was surprised to see a block of marble with the Chalice engraved on the top, along with a short message and a list of names. I started reading them until I got to my own. I read it four or five times to be sure it said what I thought it did, and then looked at Ulnyx, waiting on his knees.

"I already know that I died," I said.

He shrugged. "Don't look at me boss," he said. "This is your Source."

My Source, right. I looked at the memorial again. My soul was still trapped by my memories of mortality, of being human. My name on the stone was just a reminder that I had once been part of the world of man. The power I possessed was limited by what I had learned from that existence, but that part of my being had ended. From the beginning, Dante had said that I would need to move beyond my past self in order to succeed in holding the tide of human desolation at bay. I had learned so much in the past few days, and now all of my experiences were coming to a head.

How could I just let go of being human? I reached out and ran my finger along the embossment of my name on the stone. Landon Hamilton didn't exist anymore. He had been a mortal who had been killed by a demon. I held his memories, but I was something different, something more. I was Divine.

"Landon." The voice was soft and warm. Josette.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, turning to look at her.

She was standing at the bottom of the steps up to the memorial,

wearing the white coat and boots she seemed to favor. Her eyes were their more human brown, but she still bore an ethereal glow.

"You called for me, and I came," she said.

It was the same thing Sarah had said when she had appeared here. Did that mean Josette was asleep too, resting in the front passenger seat of the Suburban?

"How did I call for you?" I asked. There was so much I still didn't know.

"I felt you in my mind, and then there was a door. Your voice was carrying through it, whispering my name. I opened the door and stepped through, and you were here. What is this place?" She looked around the exhibit hall, her eyes wide with wonder. When she saw Ulnyx, she gasped. "This is your Source?" she asked.

I nodded. "Don't be afraid of Ulnyx. He's under my control." I saw the Great Were bristle at the statement, but he could do no more.

Josette stepped up to me. "Do you know what this means?" she asked.

"The world is my Source," I repeated. "I should be able to draw power from it when I'm awake, but so far I haven't been able to. Josette, you were once alive. How did you learn to let go?"

She held up a hand. "Landon, you've misunderstood," she said. "This is not your mortal world, your Earth."

I looked around. It sure looked like the world I was familiar with. "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember what I told you of the realms, and how they are organized?"

I remembered. Heaven, Hell, and Earth were stacked on the same plane, separated by dimensions of... I don't know what. Belinda Carlisle hadn't been totally wrong, but it was actually Purgatory that was a place on Earth.

"Yes. What about it?"

As soon as I asked her, I knew. Her response verified it for me.

"I've fallen," she said. "That's why I could hear you calling me. That's why I can reach you in this place. Most of us never reach our Source. For those of us who do, it is often a single room, for the powerful a garden perhaps. I have been to my Source once. It was my childhood bedroom, the place where I always felt the most at peace and the most safe. This world is your Source, as amazing as that is. Purgatory is your Source."

In that moment I felt it, and I knew it. I don't know if I would have had Josette not been there to open my eyes. Did Dante know? I suspected he did, but he would never have told me. I had been thinking of Purgatory as a location in the mortal realm, like a Fantasy Island hidden in the Pacific somewhere, or the lost city of Atlantis. I had never considered that it was another dimension so close to our own that it rested just out of reach, in close enough proximity that I could use its power to alter my familiar universe.

That was what I had to let go of. Not my prior mortality, but my understanding of where I was, where my Source originated, the power that I had at my command. I could change things as I saw fit here. I could make this world as I decided it to be. When I focused, I was reaching into my Source and changing this world. What happened in the mortal realm was in many ways a side effect, similar to the light of the sanctuaries' beacon.

A thought, and I was standing right next to Josette, no bipedal motion required. I put my arm around her tiny waist and with another thought we were outside. One more thought and I launched us into the sky. This was my place, my rules. Here, I was as close to a god as I could ever hope to be.

The ground was a blur beneath us as we rocketed forward on wings of thought. Josette was an experienced aviator, but she was filled with a new sense of wonder in sharing the rush of flight with me. She giggled and hooted while I looped around the Museum a few times, enjoying the sensation of being airborne, then shot off into the sky like a cannon. I knew where I wanted and needed to go.

We never made it. We were headed in the right direction, a dark streak cutting through the night air, when Josette gasped and vanished from my arms. A split second later I felt a sharp pull within my chest, and the ground disappeared from beneath me. The hard metal roof of the Suburban greeted me instead. My body slammed up against it, then dropped back down to the seat.

"Dammit," Rebecca cried, her arms fighting with the wheel of the truck to keep it on the road. I could feel the mass of steel slipping and sliding along the snow-covered surface.

"What's happening?" I shouted, reaching out to wedge myself between the roof and the seat. I heard a sharp cry from outside the car, and then saw a gout of flame pour over the windshield.

"Fire demon," Rebecca said, throwing me forward as she

slammed on the brakes. I saw a tremendous torso flash by in front of us, then heard crashing in the trees. “I don’t think Reyzl was too happy with us ruining his conquest.” Rebecca slammed back down on the accelerator as heavily as she dared, sending the Suburban lurching forward again.

I couldn’t help but smile. “Good,” I said. “Josette, are you okay?”

She leaned over the seat to look at me. “For now,” she said. I saw she had a cut on her forehead that was threatening to run into her eye. She was too vulnerable like this.

“Did you have a nice dream?” Rebecca asked. I could see her look back at me in the rearview mirror. Was that jealousy? What had Josette been saying in her sleep?

“It was interesting,” I replied.

I grabbed onto the car again when a massive shoulder pummeled the side. Rebecca’s hands worked the wheel, and she somehow managed to keep us on the road. She wouldn’t be able to do this forever.

“I wouldn’t think a fire demon would do too well with snow,” I said.

“It wouldn’t, if the snow could touch it,” Rebecca said. “It evaporates before it has a chance.”

I looked out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the thing, but it was just too dark. There was another shrill cry, and I could feel the heat pummeling the roof of the Suburban. Josette cried out in response, ducking down into the passenger compartment as far as she could go.

Rebecca slammed on the brakes once more, throwing me against her seat as the car skidded forward. The demon was standing in front of us, illuminated in the headlights, a twenty-plus foot tall winged monster coated in red and blue flame. Its muscular frame looked like dull red steel, its head a red, chiseled humanoid face with a pair of curled horns. It was holding a huge jagged edged cleaver that was dripping heat onto the roadway, where it sizzled and dug into the cement. I may have been able to heal from burns, but I wasn’t invulnerable, and that thing didn’t need to be precise to cut us all into pieces.

The demon raised the blade as we approached, the car doing nothing but sliding along the icy roadway. Just when its arm reached its apex, the car hit the wet pavement melted by the

demon's fire and jerked to a stop. We were sitting ducks. I closed my eyes and focused my will, reaching for the power that I now knew was just a micron thin film of existence away.

It was as though I were diving into an ocean, feeling the ripples of energy spread around me, envelope me, and cleanse me as I submerged myself. I raised my hands and pulled the snow from the sides and rear of the car, gathering it up and hardening it to ice over the top us. The crack of the demon's cleaver sinking into the ice shield echoed through the night like a massive thunderclap. I felt the pressure in my mind, but I pushed back, drawing the strength I needed from my Source. It was enough.

The fire demon roared out in anger, bringing its weapon down on the shield again and again. The defense was holding for now, but I couldn't maintain it forever. When the monster raised its arm to strike, I threw the block of ice up at it on a tremendous gust of air. It managed to get through the flame and slam into the demon, causing it to cry out in unimaginable agony. It tumbled backward to land with a terrible crash.

Massive amounts of steam poured off it, the flames of its body dimming and pulsing, fighting to stay lit. I took the opportunity to throw open the rear door of the truck, grab one of Rebecca's swords, and jump out. Rebecca and Josette both reached back to try to stop me, but I evaded their efforts. The second I was clear, I pulled more of the snow and moisture to me, encasing the Suburban in ice. This was one fight they couldn't help me win. I walked to the front of the car, lit from behind by the car's headlights reflecting through the ice. I looked back and could see Rebecca and Josette both watching me with frightened concern.

I raised the blessed sword in front of me and focused my will on the air around me, pulling the heat out of it and making it colder and colder. My skin crawled with the tingling numbness of threatened hypothermia, my Divine nature keeping me in an uncomfortable but survivable homeostasis. The fire demon's flames had sputtered back to life, and it pulled itself to its feet. I stood before it, a mouse against a lion, certain only that I wasn't about to let it toast my friends.

It regarded me warily, yellow eyes peering down on me from above, not sure what to make of the puny thing that had knocked it on its ass. We stared each other down for a minute or more, and then it reared back and belched flame, leaning down and in at me

as it did so.

I sucked the heat from the air around me, pushing it away and off to the landscape on either side of the road. The trees around us ignited, lighting up the scene as if we were battling in Hell itself. The blade followed the gout of flame; its size creating more of a scream than a whistle.

I brought up my own sword to block, holding tight on my Source and pulling in more and more power to steel my body against the blow. I caught the edge of the blade with my own, feeling the vibration through my limbs as I pushed back against the force.

My feet dug into the pavement, pulling up cement while I slid backward. I pushed harder, feeling the heat of my muscles, the heat of the cleaver's flames, then turned the weapon aside.

I leaped forward on impossibly strong legs, my body carried up, up, up, right into the face of the surprised demon. I focused once more, taking the cold of the frigid air around me and pumping it all into the sword. A nasty set of teeth bent and snapped at me as I rose towards them, but I planted my free hand on the demon's small, wide nose, switched my grip on the blessed blade, and sank it deep into the monster's forehead.

The length of the weapon steamed and hissed, the cold breaking through the barrier of heat, the icy metal a powerful poison. Veins of ice spread out from the insertion point, and the demon screamed in pain. I held on while it shook and thrashed, reaching up to try to pry the metal splinter loose.

It took almost three minutes for the demon to stop fighting to dislodge me, and I held tight to the sword the entire time. The ice ran down from its head to its neck, from its neck to its shoulders, out and down towards its feet. The flames that coated its body snuffed out, it dropped to a knee, and then fell forward to the ground. When it hit the earth, it shattered, breaking into millions of pieces of frozen ash. Its head was the last to smash against the road, and it landed just feet from the front of the Suburban.

While the skull was being reduced to icy dust, I waved at Rebecca and Josette, a surfer making a clean break to the shore. Back on terra firma, I pulled the protective shell away from the car, and then let go of my hold on my Source. At once I was overcome with a wave of heat, nausea, pain, and light, and I don't know what happened next because I wasn't awake to witness it.

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I woke up in bed at the Waldorf, my naked body frigid to the touch, shivering with chills, and sweating profusely despite being buried under a mound of blankets. Josette was sitting cross-legged on the end of the bed, keeping an unblinking watch on me. She had traded in her angel robe for a pair of blue jeans and a leather jacket, looking ever more the human than I could have anticipated. Still, the look suited her.

"Hey," I said, my voice little more than a meek whisper. I tried to lift my head and was rewarded with a massive throbbing.

Her face lit up when she saw I was awake. "Fellow, you are revived," she said. "Thank the Lord."

She was forgetting herself, and she looked embarrassed for it. I was going to ask her what time it was, what day it was, but somehow, I knew. I could feel a trickle of energy flowing into me from Purgatory like a leaky faucet. The innate connection between the two realms was undeniable. I guess it had to be that way in order for Mr. Ross' so-called 'processing' to run without a hitch.

I had been unconscious for about six hours. It had been long

enough for Rebecca to get us back into the city in the takes-a-lickin-keeps-on-tickin Suburban, get me back to the Waldorf, take off my clothes, and bury me under these blankets. I had opened myself too much to my Source. There was a part of me that was still, and would always be human, and it couldn't absorb that kind of Divine energy without consequence.

Neither could this world. Dante had warned me, and I hadn't been careful. It was like a spinning top, too much flow from Purgatory, too many changes and alterations, and it would begin to wobble and potentially topple over. I had to be more careful, more precise - a surgeon instead of a linebacker, for everyone's sake.

"It's good to see you again," I said. "How are you holding up?" I shook a bit as a wave of coldness washed over me. I really needed to be more careful.

She smiled. "I am well. As well as can be. I do not need to understand God's plan to have faith in it. I've found I am still able to adjust my wardrobe, which is something I guess." Her blue jeans turned black before my eyes, then shifted back to blue. "I didn't feel right about wearing white. Not now."

"I'm sorry Josette," I said for the second or third time. She waved her hand at me.

"There is nothing to apologize for, as I have already said. The Lord has decided our paths lie together, and I do not begrudge Him for that. I enjoy your company."

That statement succeeded in stopping my shivering for a few seconds and brought some heat to my face.

"We make a good team," I replied. "Where's Rebecca?"

"She went back to her apartment to retrieve something she called an Obi," Josette said. "I am not familiar with the term."

I couldn't help but laugh. This conversation was making every part of me feel better. "An Obi is an Awakened human, he's my-" I stumbled for a moment trying to think of the right word, something Josette would get. "Squire? For lack of a better word."

She furrowed her eyebrows in a super cute way. "He carries your sword?"

I laughed out loud that time. "Maybe squire wasn't the best word. He's a friend," I said. "We didn't bring him to the sanctuary because he's mortal. He would have been killed."

"Why do you not Touch him?"

It was my turn to be confused. "Touch him?" I asked.

“Where do you think the mortal servants of God come from?” She floated to her feet as though she were lighter than air. She walked up the bed, leaving the smallest impression in the mattress, then turned and flopped down beside me. “For angels, you Touch a mortal by dousing their head in holy water, saying a prayer, and laying hands on them. It’s very much like the Catholic Baptism ritual, but with a little more power behind it. Of course, I wouldn’t know how a Purgatorian would do it.”

We sat together in silence for a minute while I thought about it. I had this new tap of energy flowing into me. What would happen if I flowed some of it into a human?

“That wouldn’t make him invulnerable,” I said.

“It would make him resistant,” she replied. I was convinced, but I wouldn’t do it without asking Obi for permission first. He might not want to be that tied to my power.

“Have you ever fought a fire demon before?” I asked. That thing had been ridiculous, and it amazed me to think of her standing toe to toe against one.

She shook her head. “Never alone,” she replied. “That Great Were we fought was a toy in comparison. Thankfully, they are denizens of Hell and are rarely summoned to this realm. They are difficult to control, and very unstable here. The amount of power needed to keep the Rift open would be immense.”

Reyzl was powerful, but by the way Josette spoke of the fire demon, I didn’t think he was that powerful. “Reyzl didn’t summon the demon alone,” I said.

Josette agreed. “He would have needed at least two other demons of his equal to maintain the Rift. It is bad sign if they are already working together to stop you.”

“How many demons of Reyzl’s power are there?”

“Reyzl is what is known as an archfiend. There are three in North America, four in Europe, one in Japan, one in Australia.” She started counting on her fingers as she listed their numbers. “Two in Russia, six in the Middle-East including three just around Jerusalem, and probably a few others who have gone undocumented. They are very territorial, though they will join forces if the need is great enough.”

That was an awful lot of evil running around. I still felt like I knew so little about how this war operated, even though I was finding myself deeper and deeper into the thick of it. Still, I wasn’t

convinced that Reyzl had done this with the help of another archfiend. I just didn't think I'd been in play long enough or proven myself strong enough for the demon to ask for help from his peers. That left me with just one other possibility.

"What about the Demon Queen?" I asked.

Her reaction was one of shock. "How do you know of her?"

"Da.... The Outcast told me," I replied, remembering not to upset her by using his name. "Did Rebecca tell you anything about our goal?"

"No, she said she would leave it to you to explain."

I spent the next hour or so telling Josette everything I knew about the Chalice, the Demon Queen, and the Knights Templar. Everything Dante had told me to steer me in this direction. She knew most of it, but from a different perspective. The angels wanted to find the Chalice, to bring it back to the sanctuary, and to use it. She wouldn't tell me what effect it would have on a seraph. I didn't think it was that important, so I didn't push.

While I was talking, I could feel my body normalizing, recovering from the damage I had done to it. I stopped shaking soon after, and my physical form didn't feel so lifeless to touch. I would survive this, and learn from it.

"The Demon Queen could have summoned the fire demon herself," Josette said, answering my earlier question. "She would have no need of Reyzl to do such a thing."

That's what I was afraid of. "How powerful is she?" I asked.

"She is the most powerful demon currently in this realm," she replied as if that would answer the whole question.

"Okay," I said. "You said currently. How do demons get here? Rebecca said that the ones summoned from Hell couldn't survive here long."

"All demons derive their power from the First Fallen, either through his minions here in this realm or from the power contained within Hell. He divvies this power most sparingly, as he is loathe to part with it, but does reward exceptional service as he sees fit. Demons rise in power by making deals with one another, and they rise to the top through backstabbing and betrayal, ever hoping to destroy the one above them and claim their souls. It is the nature of evil to covet power in this way."

I couldn't help but wonder if mankind was that much different. The whole organization of it made perfect sense. "So the Demon

Queen was once one of the Devil's human creations, and she ascended to her position?"

"No," Josette said, surprising me. "What I have told you is a vast simplification to the processes by which this war maintains its armies. Demons can also come from Hell on their own if they possess enough power and motivation. These are the descendants of the Second Fallen, the army of seraph who followed the First when the truce was declared, and my Lord granted him Hell."

"Why don't they come?" I asked. "Wouldn't the war end that much faster?"

"No. Think of it in comparison to man's invention of nuclear warheads. Were the strongest of the demons to enter this realm, my Lord would have no choice other than to grant His disciples leave to join the fray. The result of such a clash would incinerate this world and everything in it, leaving nothing for either side to claim."

Complete Armageddon, instead of a Rapture. "So the Demon Queen came from Hell?"

"That is the only possibility," she replied. "We would have known of her many years ago if she were accumulating power as Reyzl has. She arrived unannounced only weeks before the Chalice was lost."

It was a lot to think about. I closed my eyes and tried to picture what Hell must be like, filled with creatures of untold power that could obliterate the world in a furious firestorm. I was glad most of them chose to stay there.

"You are courting Rebecca?" The question broke the silence, shattering it into a million little pieces.

"Courting?" I asked, trying to fight against my embarrassment. "I thought you were a modern girl?"

She grimaced. "I don't know what the correct term for this is nowadays. I haven't had much inclination to explore such things."

Did angels even have an interest in relationships? It didn't seem like it, though even if they did I could understand why Josette would be disenfranchised.

"Courting is good enough I guess," I said. "No, we aren't courting. Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "It's the way she looks at you. There is a... Hunger."

I laughed. "She's a vampire. There's probably a part of her that thinks everything with two legs is food." I decided not to tell her I

had already provided Rebecca with a potent meal. Let that be our little secret.

"Landon, be serious. She likes you."

I wasn't sure about where this was going, but I found comfort in being able to talk to Josette about it. "I like her too. I think we connected, as friends I mean." She had kissed me a few times, and I had liked that, but it didn't make us an item.

"Friends?" She raised her eyebrow. "She doesn't look at you as a friend looks upon a friend."

"The hunger?"

"Yes."

She had looked at me in a strange way when I woke in the Suburban, but it had been more of a visceral, chilling look. It was not an intimate look at all, and I had taken it for jealousy. Then again, why be jealous unless you already thought there was something there, and you didn't want anyone else butting in?

"What do you think?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Rebecca and I?" The thought was both exciting and frightening. I took a deep breath to calm myself.

"As you said, she is a vampire. A demon. I don't think my opinion is the best one to go on."

"I thought you respected her choice to join me?"

"I can respect her, that doesn't mean I have to trust her," she said. "Whatever good intentions she has, her kind, her family, perhaps even her have intentionally caused pain and suffering to others. That is a difficult thing for me to resolve. Remember, I have been battling vampires for hundreds of years. She is unique in her views, which to me makes her more dangerous."

"I'm not exactly a saint," I pointed out. "You like me anyway."

"You don't exist to fuel evil," she said.

"Neither does Rebecca if she chooses not to."

Josette pursed her lips and thought for a moment. "I will trust you," she decided. "She is very attractive."

I could feel my body heating up again. "She has a powerful soul Josette. She told me you were in trouble and suggested we go to your aid. Plus, she won control of her family from her father. I'm sure you knew him, Merov Solen."

Her face darkened. "I knew him. He was a cruel nosferatu. Thank God he has been destroyed." She tilted her head, her

expression softening. “The rescue was her idea?”

“Yes.”

She was silent for a minute. “She is a rare creature indeed. Yes, I think you would do well to court her.”

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By the time Rebecca had returned with Obi, I had showered and morphed the seraph robe into something a lot more comfortable - a pair of jeans, a pair of black Keds, and a faded polo shirt. Her face lit up when she saw I was up and about, and she rushed over to wrap me up in her arms. Considering what Josette and I had spoken about, I couldn't help but get a little thrilled by the gesture.

"Hey Becca," I said into her hair, returning the hug. Her familiar smell was comforting, in a different way than Josette's company had been.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," she said into my chest.

It was a little weird that this beautiful creature that could rip through a stack of gargoyles without pause was so small and delicate in my arms. She pulled away so Obi could get in, holding out his arm in greeting. We did a proper man hug, the ex-Marine all smiles.

"Man, I was worried I wasn't going to see you again," he said.

"You know I'm not so easy to get rid of," I replied. "Did you take care of Cathy?"

He laughed and nodded. “That girl was crazy. She didn’t remember anything that had happened to her though. She just kept going on and on about how her mother messed up her whole life, how she would never meet someone special or get married. Man, I know why. Oh yeah, we’ve got something for you.”

Obi reached around and brought his bag to the front of his body, unsnapping it and pulling out a laptop. It was a super thin, slick black slab of coolness that must have cost a fortune.

“Merov’s,” Rebecca said.

“It has VPN access to the main servers,” Obi said. He was like a kid on Christmas. “Merov had a killer setup, and one of the biggest pipes in the city.”

“He used it to do automated stock transactions,” Rebecca explained. I was familiar with the latency wars being fought on and around Wall Street. He who had the best ping wins.

“I take it we can use it to get the information we need?” I asked.

“You bet,” Obi replied. He walked over to the sofa and plopped down on the end next to Josette, seeming to notice her for the first time. He gave her a big smile and held out his hand. “I’m Obi,” he said. “You must be Josette. I recognize you from the pictures. It’s awesome to meet a real angel.”

Josette hid her pained embarrassment well, taking Obi’s huge hand into her own tiny one. “Thank you,” she said. “It is fine to meet you fellow. What pictures are you speaking of?”

She didn’t know. Obi stammered out a reply. “Uhh… I’m sorry. I thought you knew. Merov had a lot of eyes on you. He wanted you to uhh… Your blood and umm… Being a virgin…”

She didn’t mask her pain as well the second time, casting her eyes down and clenching her jaw. I had to stop Obi before he stuck his foot any further down his throat.

“Obi, can you get us booted into the mainframe,” I said. He hadn’t been oblivious to her reaction, and he jumped at the chance to get out of the awkward situation.

“Sure,” he said, flipping open the cover and losing himself in the screen.

I turned back to Rebecca. Her blue eyes were dazzling looking up at me, and I could feel myself getting lost in them.

“You said before we left Merov’s that you had a lot more to tell me,” I said, my voice cracking a little.

Her eyes sparkled at my discomfort. Why was it that just

admitting there was a real attraction and interest had made her existence so much more deliciously unbearable?

“Can we talk about it in private?” she asked.

She grabbed my hand and started pulling me toward the bedroom, causing my whole face to start heating up and turning red. I had never been good with this sort of thing, as Carly Lane could attest. I was interrupted from the alone time by the bell. The doorbell. Who could that be?

Everyone was on high alert when I let go of Rebecca’s hand and approached the door. “Who is it?” I asked, trying to catch a glimpse of the visitor through the peephole. I don’t know why I was so on edge. I doubted that Reyzl or the Demon Queen would bother knocking.

Nobody answered. The door clicked and then swung open, almost smashing me in the head in the process. I didn’t get to see who was there before I was thrown backward and onto the floor, sliding back until I reached Josette’s feet. I gazed over to the side to see Rebecca had been thrown as well.

“Buongiorno Signore,” Dante said, bursting into the room.

He was wearing a gaudy red suit, holding a black cane with a large red diamond on the end, his white hair making him look like a pimped up Santa Claus. He looked pissed as he took in the four of us, piled together en masse against the sofa.

“I leave you alone for a few days, and when I come back you have a veritable Army of.” He paused as he tried to find a word to describe what he saw. Failing, he gave up. “Didn’t I warn you about working with our enemies,” he said.

I tried to get up, but my body was frozen solid. “They aren’t our enemies,” I murmured through petrified lips.

Dante raised his eyebrows. “Not our enemies?” he asked. He walked over and slammed the cane down between my legs. “Not our enemies.” He looked down on me like I was a misbehaving kindergartener. “Not our enemies. It is the nature of good and evil to be the enemy of balance,” he shouted. He pointed the cane at Rebecca, lying motionless next to me on the floor. “Her kind especially. They cannot survive without murder and destruction, and the wanton manner in which they fulfill their base needs is sickening.”

I looked to Rebecca, her face sweating and muscles tense as she tried to move. The bonds that held us were too strong, Dante’s

power too great. He aimed his cane at Josette next, the angry look in his eyes exploding in ferocity at the sight of her.

"The seraph, the servants of God who wouldn't even let me in to see Him when I discovered the truth. All of my years of loyalty and servitude, I asked for no more than a conversation, for understanding. Instead, I was turned away. They play at righteousness, but their end game is not so much."

I tried to move again, feeling the force pushing back against me when I attempted to bend my fingers. Dante was from Purgatory, his power had to be the same. He had said that Purgatory was mine to make as I saw fit, that my bloodlines and life had made me special. If that was true, he shouldn't be able to hold me here. I closed my eyes and focused on the flow of power I could feel bleeding into me. I focused my will on bending my fingers, pulling the power in to aid me. I strained to make a fist, to conquer Dante's hold. I failed.

Dante had moved on to Obi, who sat there in silence, his eyes glued to him, not even trying to move. Ever the soldier, he was conserving his strength, waiting for his opportunity. Dante looked him over, then reached out and poked him in the chest with the cane.

"You are Awake, but mortal," he said, all of the anger fading from his tone. "What are you doing here?"

He must have let go of Obi's mouth because the former Marine was able to speak. "I'm fighting for my people," he said. "I'm not afraid of you."

Dante's face exposed his huge smile. "No, you aren't. Nor should you be my friend. This is your fight, and you have every right to be part of it."

"So you'll let me go?" Obi asked, motioning to the rest of his body with his head.

"Ahhh, most assuredly so, Signore. But not yet." By Obi's reaction, I could tell Dante had frozen him again.

I reached for the flow a second time. I couldn't use it to make myself strong enough to move, but maybe that was a clue. If all I was doing was trying to counter force with force, it was a zero sum game. Whatever hold Dante had on me, I couldn't remove it physically, and so I stopped trying. What I needed to do was understand the power, and counter that.

"I am happy, Landon, that you have found one reasonable ally,

though I find it unlikely that he will survive much longer." Dante turned his attention back on me, looking down with the smile still on his face.

I maintained my calm, my senses questing forward to try to discern his Divinity, to test his power. I focused, watching in fascination as his form lost its solidity, fading away and becoming almost ghostlike. He tilted his head, observing me. I focused harder and literally made his visage split in two, one atop the other but just the tiniest fraction off, as if I were watching a 3d movie without the glasses. I looked past him around the rest of the room, and I could see the same double vision effect. My excitement grew when I realized that I had uncovered his secret.

"Signore," Dante said, still looking down on me. "We should speak in private."

I looked down at myself, my single, solid self. Yes, we should. I felt the flow of power pounding in my soul, and I opened it up into a stream and followed it back to its origin. I watched my body shift, one world superimposed over another.

In Purgatory, I was free, and I reached out with my will and lifted Dante away from me, holding him in midair with ease. I floated to my feet, noticing with awe that the entire other world was frozen in time.

"You wanted to talk," I said to him. "Talk." I lowered him to the ground, but I summoned Ulnyx. "Keep an eye on him," I ordered the Great Were. Ulnyx bowed and went to stand at Dante's side.

A solid mountain of laughter erupted from Dante then. It was so strong and loud that I almost lost my hold on the tether of energy that I was using to keep myself there. Before I even knew what had happened, he had grabbed Ulnyx by the throat and thrown him to the ground, stepping on his neck with a fine Italian leather shoe.

"Excellente Signore," he said, his voice booming. "You have surpassed every one of my expectations for what you could become. I am a proud papa." His face turned serious. "Still, do not think that any of your toys can control me. I will forgive your error this once." He stepped off Ulnyx and allowed the Were to rise, sputtering, and slink back behind me.

He had been hoping for this, I realized. Every word and gesture in the Waldorf had been to push me, to test me, to find out what I could do.

"How did you know?" I asked him.

“I can see it in you,” he replied. “I can feel it like a geyser bubbling up from your soul. It is the power I always knew you had, but I did not expect you to master it so soon.”

It wasn’t as though I had a choice at the pace. Even with my success, I had almost died a half dozen times. “What you said about my companions?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Mostly true,” he replied. “But I didn’t send you back as my puppet, I sent you back as man’s Champion. The decisions you make are yours to make. I may give in to my discontent at times, but do not be dissuaded by my biases.”

“Did you see the seraph’s eyes?” I asked him. I wanted to find out what he knew about Josette’s situation.

He nodded. “Yes. She has fallen to you, which is a most fortunate event. She is a powerful ally, though I would expect her to refuse to fight against good. The other one, the human, he is a rare and unexpected find.”

“It’s like I’ve been blessed,” I said. Dante didn’t laugh. “Lost your sense of humor?” I asked him.

“Mr. Ross has provided me with some information,” he replied, ignoring my question. “It’s the reason I came to visit you. We’re running out of time, Landon. As you know, the North American archfiend has already launched the first of a series of attacks against seraph strongholds. Their goal is to cut off the angels’ sanctuaries so that they cannot reinforce their numbers. Once that is done, they will hunt down the remaining forces one by one until they have shifted the balance enough to gain complete control of the mortal world. The power of the Grail makes them close to unstoppable.”

“The holder of the Chalice has power over the amulets,” I said. “We can stop it if we can get the Grail.”

Dante nodded. “That is so. We know the Demon Queen is in possession of the Chalice, but even Mr. Ross has been unable to discover her location. Demons would rather be tortured to death than give her up.”

If the Demon Queen had the power to summon the fire demon on her own, I could only imagine what she could do to squealers. I would have chosen torture too.

“Rebecca, the nosferatu, has the information we need to track her down. How much time do we have?”

“According to Mr. Ross, all sanctuaries are to be attacked at midnight in their respective time zones. New York was not

supposed to be attacked until then either, but the archfiend Reyzl chose not to wait, likely so he could claim glory for being the first to victory. It's too late to save Australia, but the sooner you find the Demon Queen, the better."

I had been shortsighted to think that the goal of destroying the sanctuary had been to create a single foothold of power in New York. I had underestimated the Demon Queen, not realizing that her play was for a quick and decisive victory versus a strategically staged attack. To be honest, I hadn't thought about any of that. I had been more concerned with saving Josette, not even considering the ultimate motives. Now more seraphs were dead, and the balance was sliding further and further towards Hell.

"Okay," I said. "I'll find out where the Demon Queen is, hunt her down, get the Chalice, and save the world." It sounded so simple, and somehow I managed to say it as if I thought I could pull it off. To think that six months ago, I was just an ex-con security guard. "What are you going to do?"

Dante shook his head. "There is nothing I can do. This fight is for the world of mankind. The way you draw your energy to return here, I must do something similar to walk in your world, and neither one of us can do so forever."

I looked back at my body in man-space, still frozen in time. "One last question," I said.

Dante raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Yes?"

"What would you have done if I hadn't been able to transport myself here? If I hadn't discovered the secret of my Source?"

Dante didn't hesitate to answer. "Of course, Signore, I would pray."

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When I regained my body, Dante was gone. Rebecca was snarling with her fangs bared, and Josette and Obi sat on the couch and shook out their arms in disbelief that they could move them again. I jumped to my feet and turned to Obi.

“Obi, fire that thing up and see what you can get. We need to move fast.”

“What's going on?” Josette asked. “The Outcast?”

“I'd like to rip the Outcast into tiny little pieces,” Rebecca said. She relaxed her posture and looked at me. “Where did he go?”

“Back to Purgatory,” I told them. Then I gave them the rundown of what he had said to me.

“Even if the New York sanctuary is the only one standing, it will not be enough,” Josette said. “With all of the angels forced to travel to one location, it will be very easy for Reyzl to keep them boxed in. Archangel Michael will know this, and will be forced to enter the battle himself.”

“Global thermonuclear war,” I said.

“Which means we have to find the Queenie before they have

time to take out the rest of the sanctuaries," Obi said. "If the archfiends are orchestrating this whole thing, then they have to know where she is, don't they?"

"Not necessarily," Rebecca said. "She could be sending everything along over an encrypted online channel, or using familiars. There's no guarantee what Merov knew will be of any use to us, but it's the best we've got right now."

"What's the password?" Obi asked. Rebecca reached out for the laptop. He handed it to her, and she keyed it in.

"It's too complex to say it," she explained, handing the computer back to Obi.

His fingers flew over the keys as he worked his hacker magic. "This is going to take some time," he said after a few minutes. "There's just so much data here."

Rebecca reached out and took my hand. "We still need to talk," she said. "Holler when you find something." She pulled me towards the bedroom again, and this time there were no interruptions.

She kissed me the moment the door had closed, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and pulling my face down to hers. I could feel my pulse quickening at the sensation of her lips against mine, the sweet smell of her, the soft firmness of her body pressed against me. It was a moment I didn't want to end, a moment that I wanted to get lost in, to hold onto forever, to forget about the consequences if we failed to find the Demon Queen. It would be so much easier to stay here, to hide in the Waldorf Astoria with Rebecca and enjoy one another until the demons came for us. Until we were forced to fight, were overwhelmed and destroyed. It was the last part that caused me to break the embrace, to end the kiss.

"You are incredible," she said to me.

"So are you," I replied.

I had so many thoughts circulating through my head, but I didn't know how to express any of them. They all coalesced in the same spot. I wanted her to stay with me, to stay by my side, to be my girlfriend? It seemed a naïve and simplistic way to describe the relationship I hoped we could have. Girlfriends were for humans. I didn't know what it was for us. She was here, now, so that would have to be good enough.

"Whatever happens," she said, "I want you to know that I'm so happy that I met you, and that we got to spend the last few days together. You've changed my life in more ways than you can

imagine.”

Saying the premature goodbyes like this, it was like Casablanca or something. “Here's looking at you, kid,” I replied. She laughed at my bad humor. “Seriously, I'm not giving up until I'm dead. If I have to take on all of the demons in Hell, so be it. They'll be after me anyway, and it's not like there'll be much else to do once Hollywood has been eaten.”

She smiled. “We'll fight together,” she said. “You're mine. I'm not about to let some other demon take you.”

“That's super sweet of you,” I said. “There was something else you wanted to tell me. Something you learned from Merov.”

Rebecca's smile faded. “It doesn't matter now,” she said. “If we make it through the next twenty-four hours, we can talk about it then.”

I was reluctant to just drop it, but it wouldn't matter anyway if we failed to stop the Demon Queen. I pulled Rebecca close again and kissed her, initiating the intimacy for the first time. Her response was passionate, ferocious, her mouth hungry for mine. The hunger. It was as Josette had named it. I would have let it continue for who-knows-how-long, but Obi was way too good at cracking computers.

“I've got something,” he shouted from the sitting room. I gave Rebecca one last kiss, and we dashed out to see what Obi had discovered.

“What do you have?” I said, sliding onto the sofa between Obi and Josette.

Rebecca took up the space on the arm of the chair on the other side. Obi had his face planted against the screen, his finger tracing a line of numbers across it.

“This is an encrypted e-mail Merov received about where to pick up the amulets for the assault,” he explained. “It was deleted, but I managed to pull it from the drive and decrypt it.”

I laughed. “Obi, we were only gone for five minutes.”

“That's what you think,” he replied.

I hadn't realized I had been so busy with Rebecca. I had totally lost track of time.

“Anyway,” he said, “Reyzl and Merov were exchanging emails about the attacks on the sanctuaries. As far as I can tell, the dude was planning to carry out the attack, and then join forces with the other lead demons to go after the Queen, your standard double-

cross. He knew he would need control of the Chalice first or they would lose the power of the amulets, and she would kill them all."

He scrolled down a bit and pointed at a line of garbled text. "Here, he's telling Merov that he found out how to reach her, and that once the sanctuary has fallen he'll send him the location and time that they are going to converge on it. As near as I can tell, he was going to go talk to her in person and distract her while his minions stole the Chalice, then once it was out of her reach they would bring in an army of thousands through a series of Rifts that the other big bads would create."

"I wonder if it would be enough," I said. I looked at Rebecca. "You don't have this in your inherited memories anywhere?"

She shook her head. "What time was it sent? Maybe Merov never saw it."

"Hang on one sec," Obi said, using his finger to trace the line of code across the screen again. "Yeah, this was sent about an hour before we went in. He never read it. So.. we know that Reyzl knows where the Chalice is, and that Merov didn't know. Now what?"

I didn't want to say it, but there was only one answer. "We have to get Reyzl and make him talk."

"How are we going to do that?" Josette asked.

"We bring him to us," Rebecca said, her blue eyes twinkling. "We make a deal with him."

"What kind of deal?" I asked.

"We want the Chalice, he wants the Demon Queen. If we take the Chalice, then he has his chance to attack her."

That must have made sense to her in some kind of demon-logic because it evaded me. "Why would he do that?" I said. "He already has his plan to go after the Queen, he doesn't need us."

She looked at me as though I was to be pitied for my lack of understanding of the complexities of deals with devils. "Landon, you have to think more like a demon. Think with your evil side."

She was right. I was thinking too much like a human. Reyzl had the potential to live forever. He was hundreds of years old. He didn't need to do anything based on the immediate reward. He could plot and scheme for years to see a single thread reach its completion.

"There are a few possibilities," I said. "The most important part is that if we do the dirty work for him, his risk is reduced, because if we fail she'll never know he had anything to do with it and he'll

get rid of some of the thorns in his side." I looked at Josette as I said it. She had been his greatest adversary for who knows how long. "If we succeed, he'll either renege on the deal and try to take the Chalice by force or he'll let us go with it, but he'll make sure he does everything he can to know its whereabouts and go after it when our guard is down. A thousand years or two is nothing to him."

"He's already waited more than two thousand," Josette agreed. "He was not an archfiend then, but he predates Christ."

I hadn't known that. I looked at Josette in shock. "Seriously?"

"Reyzl was known by another name once, before the First Fallen returned him to this world. He was Pentawere, son of Egyptian King Ramses III, last of the great Egyptian Pharaohs. He plotted with his mother from her bed and slit his father's throat, murdering him in cold blood. He was hanged for his treachery, but he always hungered to return to this world and claim the power that he still believes is his. The First granted him his wish, and he has spent the last three thousand years building his strength through deceit, destruction, and orchestrated chaos."

"Three thousand years," Obi said. "That's a heck of a lot of deceit, destruction, and chaos."

Josette nodded. "Yes, it is. I have spent the last two hundred years working with my fellows to keep his power neutralized. He has almost reached the point that he will be unstoppable without intervention from an archangel. The Chalice will give him the power he needs."

"So the likelihood that he won't double-cross us is pretty much zero," I said.

"I wouldn't be too sure," Rebecca said. "He'll have to decide if he wants to take on the Demon Queen immediately, because she's sure to come after the Chalice as soon as she knows it's gone. It may be to his advantage to let us go with it and recapture it later."

There were so many possibilities. It was enough to make my head spin. "Either way, we need to be ready to fight back. I think I'd rather deal with Reyzl than the Demon Queen."

"I think we're all agreed on that," Josette said.

The idea of making a deal with Reyzl was crazy, but it didn't seem we had any other choice. We had to get the Chalice. We could worry about everything else once that was done. "Okay," I decided. "Rebecca, do you know how to get a message to him?"

“Of course,” she replied. “I just need to make a phone call.”

Perfect. That would give me some time to take care of something else. “Make the call,” I said. “Obi, can I talk to you in private for a minute?” The former Marine lifted his head from the laptop.

“Sure man,” he replied, closing the lid and putting it onto the end table next to him. He got up and followed me into the bedroom. “Look man, I like you, but I’m not going to make out with you,” he said with a laugh when I closed the door.

“I had something else in mind,” I said. “I was talking to Josette, and she suggested that I promote you.”

Obi laughed. “Promote me? I didn’t know we had ranks.”

“It’s not that kind of promotion. I want to... I don’t know what a good word is... *Enhance* you.”

“Like Robocop?”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. “I was thinking Steve Rodgers,” I replied.

Obi’s smile faded as he accepted that I was being serious. “What do I have to do? What are you going to do?”

“You don’t have to do anything,” I said. “You’ve seen what I can do. How I can do it is a little complicated, but the important part is that I can pull some of that power out, and push it into you. I can make you stronger, faster, more resistant to damage, fatigue.”

“Steve Rodgers,” Obi said, his expression thoughtful. “What’s the catch?”

“You’ll be tied to Purgatory. If you die, you can never go to Heaven, but you can also never go to Hell. Other than that, no uniform, no shield.”

It was obvious that Obi was torn. It was an easy decision to make if you were a devout believer or a serial killer. Join your team and be assured that the life after your life would be what you wanted or deserved. It wasn’t so simple for someone like Obi. He had a strong desire to help his fellow man; almost his entire life had been dedicated to it. At the same time, he believed he was a good person, and he wanted to see Heaven one day. From what Josette had told me about getting souls to come back to fight, I couldn’t blame him.

“Do it,” he said, lifting his eyes and looking right into mine, burning into them with the strength of his conviction. He was a soldier first. “You aren’t going to make it through this without me.”

“No, I don’t think I would,” I replied. “Kneel down.”

Obi dropped to his knees in front of me, still looking up at me with proud confidence. I reached out and put my hands on his forehead, and then closed my eyes. I could feel the soft heat of his flesh against my palms, and I held onto that sensation as I reached down into my soul and took hold of the flow of my Source. I pulled it up with care, not sure of how much I needed, and certain that I didn’t want to harm Obi.

As I gathered the power, I focused my will on the former Marine, telling his body to be stronger, tougher, healthier, more powerful - superhuman. His forehead grew hotter under my hands, and I could feel the sweat beading and running along the outside of my fingers. I pushed more of the energy into him, each moment of thought and will increasing his endurance. When his mouth opened, and he began to moan, I ebbed the flow and dropped my hands from his forehead. The second I did, his body fell backward onto the floor.

“Obi,” I said, kneeling down over him. “Obi!” I was going to put my hand to his throat to check his pulse, but I didn’t need to. I could sense him lying there below me. I could feel the Divine energy that I had implanted in him, the same as I could sense it in others. I knew he was alive, I just hoped he wouldn’t sleep too long.

His eyes flicked open, and he threw out a surprised fist. It connected squarely with my gut, the blow cracking my ribs and lifting me four feet off the ground. I landed back on my knees with grunt of pain.

“Ah crap,” Obi said, realizing it was me. “I’m sorry, man.”

“I guess it worked,” I said. “How do you feel?”

“Ready to go kill some demons,” he replied.

I stood and held out my hand to him, but he used his new strength to push himself up off the floor to a stand.

“Thanks, man, but I got it,” he said with a grin.

We went back out into the living room. Josette and Rebecca were sitting on the sofa, facing each other and talking as if they were old friends. When they noticed we had returned, they both looked at us and giggled.

“What?” I asked defensively. I had gotten the giggle treatment a lot in my youth, and I knew from that experience it was never due to something flattering.

“It is of no concern fellow,” Josette said. Her eyes examined Obi.

“It is done,” she stated.

“I’m a new man,” Obi replied.

“You Turned him?” Rebecca asked, surprised.

“Enhanced,” Obi corrected. “I’m not a demon.”

“Reyzl?” I asked, with a little more force than I had intended.

“Let’s go up to the roof,” Rebecca said.

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“What were you talking to Josette about?”

I had been needling Rebecca for the contents of her conversation with the seraph the entire way up to the roof. We had left Josette and Obi behind, and had taken the emergency stairwell up, bypassing the door lock that was supposed to keep guests away from the top of the building. She had been ignoring me until we stepped out onto the blacktop.

It was a dark, dreary, drizzly day, the kind that I had always hated when I had been a kid. I was thankful for the weather now because it meant Rebecca could be out here without risking her health.

“Landon,” she said, giving me that same look of inferiority that I was getting used to. “You destroyed a fire demon single-handed, and you’re worried about girl-talk?”

“Girls are a lot more intimidating than fire demons,” I replied, shrugging.

She laughed, and then sighed. “If you must know, Josette thanked me for bringing you to her, for helping save the sanctuary

and her life. She said thank you in the truck on the way back, but whatever you said to her while I was gone, she was a lot more exuberant. Anyway, as we were talking about it I made a comment about the way you lost all of your clothes in the flames, and she admitted with much embarrassment that God gifted you with a fine physique. You should be flattered to have an angel say that about you."

My face had turned beet red by then, and I couldn't make eye contact with her. "I didn't think Josette thought about me that way."

She tilted her head to the side to listen, and then led me away from the stairwell and over towards the huge air-conditioning unit. "Don't get too flattered," she said. "She doesn't think about anyone that way. But she does believe in you, which is much more important."

"What about you?"

When we reached the back of the unit, she stopped walking and kissed me on the cheek. "I believe in you too. He'll be here in a few seconds."

I was going to ask her who, but I felt the presence approaching for myself. It wasn't Reyzl, but it was familiar. A moment later, a small demon popped up over the side of the roof. He grinned when he saw us.

"Ahh yesss, the vampiresss and her toy."

Rebecca bared her fangs at the demon. "Yuli, I suggest you show some respect, or my toy will break you in half with a thought."

Reyzl's messenger stopped laughing and looked at me with a frightened expression. "My apologiesss Mastersss... whatss your namesss?"

"Landon," Rebecca said. "Diuscrucis Master Landon. If Reyzl doesn't remember him, remind him that it was Landon who killed his servants at the Catskill sanctuary."

I didn't think the demon could look more afraid of me than he already had, but somehow his posture took on an even deeper level of fear. He was shaking as he spoke again. "You havess a message for Mastersss?"

"I want to make a deal," I said. "Tell him we know his plans, and we want a piece of the action. We'll retrieve the Chalice from the Demon Queen, and keep his amulets in play so he can launch his attack against her. In exchange, he'll tell us how to reach her.

He'll also agree to allow us to keep the Chalice and take it off the table."

"If he accepts he's to meet us on Liberty Island in an hour," Rebecca added.

I wondered if we had overloaded Yuli's tiny mind, as he hovered silent and motionless for over a minute. I looked at Rebecca, wondering what was going on, but she was reacting as if the activity were normal. Finally, he nodded. "Yesss, yesss. Masterssss acceptsss your dealsss. He will meetsss you."

"One hour," Rebecca repeated. We were going to have to move fast to get there in such a short amount of time.

"One hourssss," Yuli said. He gave me one last frightened glance and darted away, disappearing around the corner of the air conditioner.

"Can all demons communicate telepathically?" I asked her, once I could no longer sense Reyzl's messenger.

"No," she replied. "Yuli is Reyzl's familiar. They have a blood bond that allows them to communicate without regard for distance, among other things. His messages are the only ones Reyzl trusts completely, which is why I called for him."

"Well it looks like the deal is on," I said. "An hour isn't much time."

"Then we better get a move on, worm."

"What about the Touched coming up the stairs?" I asked.

There were four of them total. I had noticed them approaching as the familiar had left, but Rebecca must have caught their scent sooner. That was why she had positioned us out of sight while we had taken care of our business with Reyzl.

She looked at me with black eyes. "We could use a few more swords," she suggested.

I heard the door groan as it opened, and four pairs of boots stomped out onto the rooftop. I could sense them standing there, uncertain.

"I know I saw it stop up here," I heard one of them say. "It looks like it's gone."

"Let's look around, just to make sure," another one said.

They had come up here looking for Yuli. Now they were fanning out, going over to the sides of the building and looking out and down to see if they could catch a glimpse of where the demon was headed. One of the Touched was headed for our not-so-hidden

hiding spot.

"Landon?" Rebecca asked.

I didn't want to kill them. I wish my reasons were more kind, but it was mostly because I didn't want to upset Josette, or risk doing any more damage to the balance.

"Can you disable them without hurting them?"

She didn't look pleased, but she nodded. Her clawed fingers retracted back into normal hands, and she reached into a pocket and removed a pair of gloves. She couldn't cut them without the poison killing them. Then again, I was sure she had done this plenty of times before. It wouldn't be very helpful to kill your prey before you could drain it of its blood.

Rebecca padded over to the corner and waited for the Touched to approach. I could sense them moving, and knew they were getting closer. I had just enough time to see half a head of long brown hair move past the edge of the HVAC when Rebecca reached out, grabbed the Touched, twisted her around and slipped a hand around her neck and mouth. I looked her right in her frightened eyes while Rebecca constricted her throat until she passed out.

"She has a dagger," Rebecca said, finding the small thin blade beneath a black down jacket.

"If it'll hurt a demon, we'll take it. Come on," I said, picking up the unconscious woman and taking us out from behind the air conditioner. When we got to the center of the rooftop, I called out to her friends. "Hey," I shouted.

The other Touched were still peeking over the edges of the building, searching for Yuli, but they turned to me when I spoke. There were two men and another woman, all wearing the same black down jacket. Seeing one of theirs in my arms, they stayed motionless while waiting to see what I wanted.

"She's alive," I told them. "You can all go home alive, and you can take her with you, but I need your weapons."

"What does a demon need with a blessed dagger?" the woman asked. Her voice was a mixture of fear and anger.

"Look closer. I'm not a demon," I said. "But I do need to go and kill one, and I'll need your knives to do it. Please don't make me take them by force."

The woman stepped towards me. "If you hand me my sister, we'll drop our weapons here and leave."

I nodded and started walking towards her with her sister cradled

in my arms. When I had reached her, I saw she had tears running down her face. I had been so callous in my consideration of their mortal lives. What was I becoming? I put the woman down and held her so her sister could support her. She used her free hand to reach into her jacket and take out her blade, handing it to me hilt first.

"If you're killing demons, I wish you good hunting," she said to me. "Come on fellows," she shouted to the two men. I could hear their daggers clatter onto the blacktop. A moment later the door groaned again, and they were gone.

"The Order of the Blessed Virgin," Rebecca said after they had left. "They take a vow of celibacy when they're Touched. They're servants, not warriors, which means the angels must be getting desperate to send them out into the fray."

"They have to be getting reports of the other attacks. We need to get to the Statue. Let's grab the daggers and go."

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Getting from the Waldorf to Battery Park before the last possible outgoing ferry made its departure proved to be a challenge of its own, even without any hiccups. After meeting back up with Josette and Obi, we decided on public transit, hopping a couple of subways and walking a bit to get down to dock with only a couple of minutes to spare. I had covered us all in a simple disguise as Japanese tourists, and the rainy weather was helpful to hide the two swords as umbrellas. We had also each claimed one of the Blessed Order's daggers. There had been a moment of tension when Rebecca and I had returned from the roof with them, but Josette had been elated when I told her that nobody had been killed in their acquisition.

It was the middle of the afternoon when the ferry docked at the Island. I looked up at the Statue, and couldn't help but think about the night Mr. Ross had dropped me off on the torch; cold, scared, and confused. It had only been a few days ago, but I felt like it had been an eternity. I had learned so much, experienced so much, changed so much in that short time.

I looked at Rebecca, remembering our first encounter. The way she had pummeled the closet I had been hiding in, toyed with me like a cat, and in the end let me go. She had been frightening in her raw, violent power. That fear had turned to admiration and affection. She wasn't a mindless killing monster, but a beautiful, intelligent, thoughtful creature with her own free will, her own power to make her own decisions. She caught me looking at her and winked. It was like she could read my mind.

The rain had kept some of the visitors away, but the Island was still crowded with people. We disembarked from the ferry and headed up towards the Statue itself. I kept my senses focused on the area around us, staying alert to any Divine that might show up. I wasn't picking up anything.

"Where are we supposed to meet?" Obi asked. He had spent the entire trip marveling at his newfound resistance to cold, and had removed his heavy wool pea coat in response.

"I don't know," I replied. "I just figured we'd know it when he showed up."

"I know where he is," Rebecca said. "Follow me."

We made our way into the pedestal, back into the lobby, and then to my surprise back to the storage closet where I had spent my first night returned to the mortal world. Rebecca cast a sidelong glance in either direction to make sure we weren't being watched, and then slipped a key into the door and swung it open just wide enough for us to squeeze through. Once we were in, she slammed the door shut and locked it again.

The room was pitch black, but I was able to see without too much difficulty, my world illuminated in grayscale. "Here?" I asked.

"You'll see," Rebecca said. She motioned with her arm to move us even further together against the back wall, pressing us up against the shelf that had been knocked over when we had met. Judging by the way Josette and Obi were stumbling in the darkness, they weren't as fortunate with their sight.

Rebecca knelt down and put her hand against the solid cement floor. Except it wasn't solid, it had just looked that way until she pulled up a simple brass handle from beneath the glamour. A glamour I hadn't even been able to see through.

"This passage was added in secret by a powerful demon named Silza," Rebecca said. "His goal was to provide a refuge for those who were looking to make the most of the opportunity to subjugate

this country, and in doing so bring them under his control. He was killed by Reyzl." She pointed at a messy scrawl of runes on the underside of the door. "These runes hide this passageway from the eyes of any who don't know the command to enter. They also protect those inside from being sensed. There are six beings in existence that know this place exists, and we are four of them. Even the Demon Queen could not find us down here, which is why Reyzl has chosen this place to meet us."

It was also her nest. Her home. I tried not to let it bother me that Reyzl knew where she lived, especially after what she had said he wanted to do to her. There was someone else who knew. Who?

"I don't have any lights," she told me, holding the door open so we could climb down.

Why would she? She didn't need them. I looked around the storage closet until I found a can of turpentine. All I needed was something to ignite. I opened it and focused, forcing the chemicals to combust, and then pulled the flames out of the can and wound them into a dancing ball of light. Josette and Obi looked grateful to have their eyes back.

"Let's go," I said, leading them down into the darkness, holding the light over the back of my shoulder.

Rebecca closed the door behind us as we descended a ladder about thirty feet down through a small round tunnel. The entire length of the shaft was covered in the same scrawled runes, and I could feel a pressure against my head while I climbed downward.

"Angels cannot enter this place," Josette said. "I have seen runes like this before, in a sewer below Paris. When I tried there was such pressure, I felt like I would drown."

"I don't feel anything," Obi said.

My feet touched down on an old, thick rug whose center had been worn away by the many feet that had scraped against it on their way up or down over the years. The passageway continued through a circular stone archway that traveled another thirty feet before opening up into a larger space. I could just make out the vague shape of a bed resting near the back end of the area. I could also hear the faint sound of…Singing?

The voice was a smooth baritone, the melody old and unrecognizable to my modern ears. Even from here I knew whose mouth was producing the sounds, whose breath was being expelled into the air in the shape of the rough, sad notes. Rebecca hopped off

the ladder, cocked her head, and frowned.

"Looks like you were right," I said to her.

She nodded, looking more fearful than I had believed she could look. I hadn't expected her to be apprehensive about the archfiend after she had already put a dagger through his heart.

The room was large, with a high arched ceiling and a mosaic floor. Against the back wall was Rebecca's bed, an intricately carved four-poster that in other circumstances I might have spent hours pondering, wondering how it had come to be in this location without anyone having seen it. Towards the southern wall a rack of blades of all shapes and sizes, thick blocks of wood with plenty of nicks taken out of them, and a mat to separate the training space. To the north a refrigerator whose contents needn't be guessed, and an antique-looking desk with a laptop sitting on it. Did she really have Internet access down here?

Sectioned off near the center of the room was a small sitting area with a leather sofa, a couple of end tables, a rocking chair, and a large flat-screen television. Reyzl was sitting in the rocking chair, his eyes closed, his legs pushing him back and forth. He was wearing a simple pinstriped suit and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, and he didn't even bother to open his eyes when we entered. Being able to examine him up close, I could see that his features were more akin to the Egyptian sculpture I had seen in the Museum than they were to any of the Indian's I had come across around town.

"You're late," he said, his voice holding a hint of a British-English accent. During our first meeting he had seemed so powerful, so malevolent, so in control of everything. Now, he didn't even register as being evil.

"That depends on your concept of time," I replied. For someone who could wait forever, there was no such thing as late.

Reyzl opened his eyes and turned his head. I could only imagine the black orbs were focused on me, looking me over for a second time. "You are a resourceful one," he said. "Your success against my angels was unforeseen and most unfortunate."

I glanced over my shoulder, surprised to find Rebecca hiding behind me. Not wanting to show them I was afraid, I walked over and sat down on the sofa, turning to face the demon.

"It was nothing personal," I said.

Reyzl laughed. "Personal," he repeated. "No, it wasn't, was it? Just as Ulnyx wasn't personal." He smiled. "It is of no matter," he

said. “I will destroy you when it suits me. Or perhaps you will come to work for me, as your predecessor once did. Either way, you will fall under my dominion as all things are destined.”

He turned his head to look back at where Rebecca, Josette, and Obi were still standing, trying to keep as much distance between themselves and the demon as possible.

“Rebecca, will you not join us? And Josette? It is a pleasure to see you here. It tickles me that after all these years you will be helping instead of hindering. You have made excellent choices in friends, Landon.”

I suspected his words were intended to intimidate. Instead, I found myself amused by his self-importance. He was a powerful demon, but I had power too, and right now I refused to let him get the best of me.

“You do understand,” I said, trying to mimic his quiet bluster, “Time is important in consideration of our endeavor.”

Reyzl’s head whipped back to look at me, his blank expression showing signs of life as he reacted to my mocking tone. Just as soon as it had appeared, it was gone, replaced with his calm emptiness.

“Of course,” he said.

He rose to his feet and walked over to the exercise mat in the corner. He knelt down on it and started scratching out runes in the vinyl, his finger cutting through in precise, rigid lines. A minute later he had completed a circle with the runes, and with a guttural exultation they began to burn.

“This is a transport Rift,” he said. “It connects to an identical circle in the home of the Demon Queen. You will step into this circle, and step out of that circle. You will retrieve the Chalice and return. At that time, I will open a second Rift to Hell through which my legions can travel through the circle and launch the assault on the Demon Queen.”

I walked over to the circle and looked right into Reyzl’s eyes. “I’ve got it,” I said. I motioned to the others. “Let’s go.”

Reyzl’s hand was a lightning bolt, lashing out and attaching itself to my shoulder, his claws digging into my skin. “Just you,” he said, letting go before I could retaliate.

Just me? “We had a deal,” I said.

“A deal that you would get the Chalice from the Demon Queen. Your companions are my insurance that you will not sell me to her in exchange of your own life. This Rift connects both locations.

Should she come through the circle, my soul would be forfeit."

"What if she kills me and then comes through?"

"I will know if she kills you, and destroy my side before that can happen. If you die, your companions will be executed as well. Consider it an added incentive." His head tilted downward towards my groin. "You must leave the weapon here," he said. "You cannot pass through the Rift while you are carrying it."

By myself, unarmed. This was getting better by the second. I should have known that making a deal with a demon wouldn't be a straightforward thing. I looked over at Rebecca, her expression a mixture of anger, sadness, and fear. Josette and Obi seemed to be hiding their emotions better, though neither looked very comfortable with the situation.

"We had a deal," Reyzl reminded me.

I could almost sense the hint of mirth in his voice. He had trapped me perfectly, leaving me between a three thousand-year-old Egyptian rock and an even harder place. Resigned, I nodded my understanding to the demon, slipped the dagger from my belt and dropped it to the floor. I took a deep breath and stepped into the Rift.

Traveling through the Rift was identical to what I had experienced in Purgatory when Mr. Ross had led me off of the beach. One moment I was one place, the next I was someplace else. There was no wormhole, no weird wavy lines, no churned stomach or headache. One step brought me into the Rift under the Statue of Liberty. The next step brought me onto a stone floor.

The first thing I noticed was that it was super bright. So bright that part of me felt like it was shriveling under the intense glow. The second thing I noticed was the Grail. It was sitting right in front of me, about forty feet away. It was resting on a simple stone pedestal, looking as though it were still in the Museum of Natural History, as though the entire thing had been a dream, and I was back to my actual life.

That illusion didn't stick long because the third thing I noticed was that I wasn't alone. To the right of the Chalice were two simple white metal folding chairs, the kind they use at outdoor weddings. She was sitting in one of them, smiling at me.

"Landon," she said with a gentle voice not befitting the Queen of Demons. "I've been waiting for you."

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So many images passed through my mind in that moment as I relived every second of my existence since the woman sitting so patiently in the chair across from me had killed me.

I should have been afraid, because the Demon Queen knew who I was, and was waiting for me, and was going to destroy me once she had finished with whatever conversation it seemed she wanted to have - there were two chairs after all.

I should have been angry, because she had caused such wanton chaos and destruction, had left such evil in her wake.

Instead, my mind was distracted by how beautiful she was sitting there, her lustrous long black hair falling over her right breast, her perfect white smile so inviting, her feline yellow eyes sexy and dangerous in a way that Rebecca could only dream of. A black collared coatdress with a deep neckline and low boots rounded out the vision. What the heck was I thinking?

I took a deep breath and swallowed, trying to get my stomach back down where it belonged before I made a mess of her clean stone floor. I could see the source of the light now, spotlights

arranged around the perimeter of the room, casting so much brightness and heat that any demon not wearing an amulet would be hard-pressed to do much of anything caught in the trap. Yet there she was, sitting bathed in the light, oblivious to the damage it should be doing to her. I could see the plunge of her dress down into her cleavage. She wasn't wearing an amulet.

"Waiting for me," I stuttered, trying not to sound overwhelmed, and failing miserably.

"For longer than you know," she replied. "We have a lot to talk about."

I started walking towards her, my legs feeling shaky beneath me. Dante's voice echoed in my mind, describing to me how this woman had slaughtered the Knight Templar who had defended the Chalice for over two thousand years, along with a whole contingent of seraphs. What could I have that she wanted?

"I need the Chalice," I said, feeling stupid right after I said it.

No doubt she knew I needed the Chalice. She had been waiting for me. Did she take it not for the demons, but to draw me in? How could she, if I had still been a mortal then? Had she known what I would become when she killed me? That one was too much to wrap my mind around.

"Take it," she said, motioning to where it sat on the pedestal. "On one condition."

One condition. I should have known. No demon would give up anything without making a deal. "What condition?"

"A few minutes of your time. That's it."

I stood there, trying to think of the trick, the angle she was using to take advantage of me. I looked at the Chalice, and then looked back at her. She didn't need to take advantage of me. There was nothing I had that she couldn't take. I walked over to her, pulled the other folding chair around so I could sit across from her, and planted myself in it.

"I'm listening," I said.

"Like I said, I've been waiting for you for a long time. Since before you even existed in fact. That day at the Museum, the day I took the Grail, I didn't know that it was you, the too polite security guard, who would be the one. I had thought I would be stalling the archfiends for years, perhaps centuries while I waited for you to arrive."

"Why were you waiting for me?"

“I want your power,” she replied. “I need your power, if I am to do what needs to be done.”

“I have a feeling you could just kill me and take my power,” I said.

She smiled, a warm, sweet smile that confused the heck out of me. She was evil, right? “It’s not a power that can be taken,” she said. “You have to share it willingly.”

“Why would I ever want to do that?” I asked. “You’re the most powerful evil in this world. You used the Chalice to arrange the devastation of mankind.”

She reached out and put her hand on my leg. I could feel the warmth of it through my jeans. “You of all people should know that evil is subjective,” she said. “Is it evil to kill in order to save? Is it evil to lie in order to protect?”

I couldn’t really argue with that. “So you’re saying you aren’t really evil?”

She took her hand away. “What I’m saying is that the word evil is just that. Look at the seraphim. The reason Hell exists is because they hold the capacity to do bad things, just as some demons have capacity to do good things - your friend Rebecca for instance. I have done things that you would call evil, but I had also done my share of good. What I need from you has a purpose that I believe is good, even if others might disagree.”

“What purpose is that?” I asked.

“To end the war, of course.”

“You can end the war with the Chalice. You can end the war by sitting here, talking to me. The archfiends will destroy the sanctuaries and all mortal life will cease to be.”

Another smile. This one was much more placating. “That’s only true under the assumption that I want the demons to win. That’s only true if we are speaking of the same war.”

I was lost. Who did the Demon Queen want to win, if not the demons? What other war was there?

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Balance,” she said. “It’s all about balance. You. Me. This world. Heaven. Hell. Purgatory. Good and evil. Every one of these things is a gyroscope, turning and spinning in a perfect choreography of chaos and order. Yet, if that is true, then why do you exist? Why do I exist?”

It was back to the question of why I am? “Balance,” I replied

“Yes, that is part,” she said. She waited for me to tell her the rest.

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked over at the Chalice. Time was not a luxury I had right now to be partaking in her riddles. “Is there a purpose to this?”

She pursed her lips, looking thoughtful. “I was afraid I might be moving too fast. That it was too soon.” She was talking, but not to me. Her yellow eyes dilated and focused as if there were someone else in the room with us. “I can’t be sure I’ll have another chance.” It was like sitting with someone while they were on the phone. “You’re right. It’s a risk, but I have to take it.”

She blinked once, then leaned forward again and put her hand up to my face, moving too fast for me to pull away. Her soft, cool palm pressed against my cheek.

“There isn’t much time,” she said to me. “I will tell you this once, and I need you to remember it.”

Her eyes locked onto mine, and I found that I couldn’t pull away. The black slits resting inside the yellow orbs captured me, held my soul in a way that left me powerless, and defenseless. While I had feared the Demon Queen and her power, I had still badly underestimated it. She could have taken my head from my shoulders and I wouldn’t have noticed.

“I do not know how long it will take. It may be days, it may be years, it may be millennia. The day will come when you will no longer eat, no longer sleep, and if you aren’t careful you will no longer feel. You will sense the balance in your soul, and what was once familiar will become alien. You will question the balance, question the war, and question yourself and everything you see around you. You will search for answers. You will scour the world to find the true purpose of who and what you are. Some you will find, and some you will need to determine for yourself. Remember that you are free, that you have your own will and your own choices. Remember these words, search for your answers, and then find me again.”

She pulled her hand from my face, keeping her eyes locked with mine. I had so many questions, but only one of them managed to find its way from my brain to my lips.

“How will I find you again?”

She leaned forward, keeping her eyes on mine until she was too close for me to focus on them. Warm lips brushed against my cheek,

then slipped back to my ear. “When you are ready, you will know. I will be waiting.”

My eyes closed of their own volition as she whispered, my body and soul absorbing as much of her essence as it could manage. “Reyzl,” I said, fighting to speak above the chaos churning through my being.

“Let him send his army. I am prepared. Take the Chalice and hide it as Dante has asked.” I felt her hand lift mine, push open my fingers, and place something in it. “Pour this into the Chalice before you step into the Rift. It has been blessed by an archangel and will permanently negate the power of the crystals. Once you step through the circle be prepared. Reyzl has betrayed you.”

She backed away from me. I opened my eyes and looked down at the object she had placed in my hand. It was a vial of blood. Her blood.

“Who are you?” I asked, looking up. Gone. I should have known.

I jumped out of the chair and raced over to the pedestal, grabbing the Chalice from the platform and running back towards the Rift. I had expected that I would have felt something from holding an object of such power, but it could have been a Chinese knockoff for all I knew. I laughed when it occurred to me that maybe it was, and the Demon Queen had just played me for an even more complete fool than Reyzl had. This whole thing had gone from crazy to crazier over the last few minutes, so I wouldn’t have been too surprised.

I stopped right before the circle, taking the vial of blood the Demon Queen had given to me and holding it over the Chalice. I hesitated to use it, unsure if I would be doing the right thing or just falling for another demonic trap. She had said an archangel had blessed the blood, and she hadn’t been lying, but Josette had told me all of those guys were staying up in Heaven, and I trusted her, so how could that be? Still, it was such an unbelievable statement that I found myself believing it. After all, the Demon Queen had let me live and I knew Reyzl wanted to kill me. It was a flimsy bit of logic, but it was all that I had.

I used my thumb to push the cork out of the vial and dumped the contents into the Chalice. The moment it touched the wood it began to hiss and steam, leaving a smell of sulfur and incense behind. I felt a shockwave that ran through my entire body, and deep within my soul I understood that I hadn’t been deceived. Now

I just had to somehow deal with Reyzl.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, taking hold of my Source and pulling its power to me, preparing it for use. I had no idea how I was going to use it, but I had been warned of the impending ambush and I needed to be ready.

I took one last gulp of air and stepped forward.

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It was one step into the circle, another step out of it. I didn't wait to get my bearings before I tried to propel myself away from the Rift, to put some distance between Reyzl and myself and get a better idea of what I was up against. It was a wasted effort. As soon I had cleared the circle a pair of hands wrapped around each of my arms, and a knee came down on my back to push me to the ground and hold me in position. My assailants bent me backward, twisting me upwards at an awkward and painful angle. It caused me to drop the Chalice, sending it tumbling to the ground a few feet away. Reyzl bent over from the waist and scooped it up into his hand. He held it up over his head, admiring it in the light of the flames coming from the Rift. His eyelids fluttered minutely. I could only guess he was realizing what I had helped the Demon Queen do.

He recovered from his discovery and turned to me. "Thank you, Landon," he said with a surprising sincerity. I suppose he was grateful I had done his dirty work for him. "I had suspected that filthy hell-spawn would be expecting me to stab her in the back again. That being the case, I just need one more thing from you."

He started walking towards me.

I tried to focus my will, to make myself stronger so I could break free of my captors. Another wasted effort, I was in too much pain to get my mind where it needed to be. I glared up at Reyzl as he approached.

“You’re in for a surprise if you think killing the Demon Queen will be so easy,” I said.

He crouched down in front of me, so we were at eye level. “Since she was expecting my betrayal, I can only assume she’s prepared for my arrival,” he said. “Don’t worry about me. I’m aware of that bitch’s tricks. That’s why I couldn’t let you keep the Chalice. That’s why I need to do this.”

His arm whipped out, the blessed dagger I had dropped gleaming in the firelight. I felt the coldness of the blade as it dug into my neck, and then the warm wetness when my blood began flowing from it. Reyzl placed the Chalice under it, collecting my plasma.

“With your blood, I have no need to waste time with crystals,” he said.

I closed my eyes, trying to convince myself that I didn’t need to breathe. The wound was already healing, but my trachea was still wide open. I knew I had to stop Reyzl from doing whatever it was he planned on doing with my blood. I tried to focus again, reaching for my Source and coming up empty.

“Having trouble concentrating?” Reyzl asked, laughing. He stood and whispered something to whoever was holding me. I couldn’t see them, but I could see the archfiend dip his finger into the Chalice, could hear the sucking sound as he fed my blood to each of them.

“Delicious,” one of them said. I knew that voice.

“I’ve never tasted anything like it,” the other agreed in the same voice, confirming their identities. I had run into them once before, when they had tried to kill me before I had ever left Purgatory. Mephistopheles's Collectors. What were they doing here?

Reyzl crouched down again, dipping his finger in my blood and taking it into his own mouth, making a show of the violation. “You have no idea how powerful your blood is when combined with the power of the Chalice. If you had, you would never have made the deal with me in the first place. I’m so glad you did though. I would have been happy enough if the Queen had taken care of you for me,

but everything has worked out more perfectly than I could have dreamed."

What power did the blood give him? Whatever it was, it couldn't be good for the balance, or for me. I struggled against the fallen angels that held me, but their grip was iron.

"Now if you'll excuse me," Reyzl said. "I have an army to summon and feed." He stood, kicked me in the face, and started walking away.

"What should we do with him?" one of the angels asked.

"I have what I need. Kill him," he replied.

When one angel released my arm, the other one grabbed it, jerking me to my feet. I could see him now, his silver hair falling over his elfish face. He was wearing the same leather duster, though there was no sign of his wings. He circled around in front of me and drew his sword.

"*Landon. I can feel you are here. What is happening?* " The voice in my head was forceful, powerful. Josette. She was still alive!

"*Are you okay* ?" I asked.

"*For the moment* ," she said. "*We are chained to the ladder by the entrance. Obi is injured. Reyzl said he has plans for us.* "

I already knew what kind of plans the archfiend had for Rebecca, and I could imagine what he would want with his longtime nemesis. Why he wanted Obi, I didn't know, but just the thought of what the demon was going to do to them was the worst torture imaginable.

"*I'm so sorry this happened* ," I said. "*I'm so sorry. Reyzl has me. I'm going to die.* "

"*No* ," she replied, her voice commanding. "*You cannot. Not yet.* "

The angel held his blade back, preparing the blow that would remove my head. "You were lucky the Outcast saved you the first time," he said. "You won't be so lucky again."

"*There's nothing I can do* ," I shouted back to Josette, even my mental voice panicked at my imminent decapitation.

Then it hit me. In my current state I couldn't focus enough to pull my Source to me, so instead I pushed myself to my Source, feeling the shift from one realm to another. The world faded into a translucent mess. My current location on Earth had no counterpart in this dimension. Instead, there was only pure white, the absence of everything, like the wall at the end of the beach. I could see the

fuzzy transparency of the mortal world frozen in time, moments away from the end of everything.

"Landon."

I turned, and she was there, in all of her heavenly glory. Not the fallen Josette, but the angel Josette, in lustrous white robes, her ivory wings stretched out wide from her back.

"Josette. I don't understand what's happening," I said. It was all too much. She floated over to me and put her arms around me, holding me as I cried. "I've failed," I told her. "You, Rebecca, Obi, the sanctuaries and the balance. I can't stay here forever, and when I go back, I'm going to die. It will all be over, and it's all my fault."

She stroked my hair and kissed my forehead. "It isn't over," she said. "You will not die. It is not my Lord's will."

I looked up at her, my vision blurry with my tears. "There's nothing I can do."

She used her finger to wipe the droplets away from my eyes. "There is something you can do," she insisted. "Summon the Beast."

The Beast? She must mean Ulnyx. With a thought, he was there. He laughed when he saw that I was crying, my state of hopelessness leaving me too weak to control him.

"I knew you would blow it," he said. "When you die, my soul will be free to find another host. I doubt your sidekick will be able to resist me."

His words snapped me out of it. I reached out with my power and constricted it around his neck, lifting him off the ground and choking him. "Your soul will never be free," I shouted, my anger flaring.

"A demon can absorb the power of another demon," Josette said. "You trapped his soul when he tried to take your body. You can take his power for your own."

Ulnyx's expression turned fearful.

"How?" I asked.

"Kill him," she replied.

So I did. I wrapped him in my power, twisting and crushing and pressing in on him, watching as his body was compressed into nothing more than dust. He had no chance to speak, no chance to beg. My power was unequaled here, and he didn't stand a chance. I could feel his soul floating unhindered by his shell, but unable to escape. I pushed it toward me on a gust of air, a small black cloud of energy. I brought it to my face and took a deep breath, taking it

in for the second time.

Memories flashed before me, years and years of memories. Ulnyx was born a werewolf, killed his parents, and slaughtered his brother, the leader of his pack. His thirst for blood and destruction was insatiable, his need to destroy unending. His power was the power of pure evil, and I brought it into me, absorbed it into my soul and took it as my own. It wasn't a painless process, the inherited memories vile and disgusting, threatening to drive me mad. I released a guttural growl, an angry howl. I could feel myself changing, losing control. I looked at Josette.

"Why?" I asked her, feeling betrayed.

"There is no other way," she said. She continued to float before me on her angel wings, her beautiful, calm, loving existence the only thing keeping the demon's evil from overwhelming me. "I will protect you fellow. I will save you so that you can save your world. I believe it is His will."

She reached out and took my hand, which I now saw was the clawed hand of the Great Were. I could feel the pressure building in my soul, could feel the darkness creeping in on me. I was only part demon. I was never meant to do what I had just done. I couldn't survive it and keep my sanity.

She took the hand and put it to her face, kissing the grotesque, demonic palm. "Godspeed, Landon Hamilton," she said. She took my evil claws and raked them down her face, cutting deep into her flesh. The black lines of the demon poison blossomed across her skin.

"No," I cried, the passion of my emotion holding the darkness back for the moment at least.

"I love you brother," she said. "Look after my daughter."

She opened her mouth, and a burst of light shot out of it, catching me off-guard and splashing against my face. It blinded me with its brightness, and pressed hard against me like water from a fire hose. I couldn't. No, shouldn't turn my head. I opened myself up to it, opened my mouth wide and accepted the flood. Again, I was overcome with memories and images, Josette's childhood, her mother and father, her brother, the pain of her violation, her death, her hundreds of years as an angel walking among the mortal, her unrequited service to God.

Then, the unexpected: her brother an archfiend, her capture, her torture, her pregnancy, and her daughter. Sarah.

I fell to the ground, my mind a battleground between good and evil, Ulnyx and Josette. I could feel them both vying for control of my soul, their memories conflicting and washing through me: death, destruction, love, charity, anger, selflessness, Heaven, Hell. Somewhere in the mix I rediscovered myself, regained my own identity, and stepped between them.

"Enough," I cried to nobody, looking up and seeing I was alone in Purgatory, in my Source. I could feel them in my soul, could hear their voices, see their memories, pull the smaller flow of their power and mix it with my own. The balance. Josette had sacrificed herself so that I could absorb the demon and not go mad. She had saved my life to stop Reyzl and protect her daughter. Sarah had thought her mother was dead. Now she was. She had done it for me.

I pulled at the new sources of power, letting the feeling of it flow through me. I looked over at my still form, held by one of the fallen angels, about to be beheaded by the other. Josette had been training for hundreds of years. She knew how to escape from that hold. Now I did too.

The sword was already whistling through the air when I retook my body. Faster than I could ever have moved before, I snapped my head back to where I knew the angel's to be, feeling the crunch as the force shattered his face and loosened his grip. In the same motion, I dropped to a knee and threw my upper half forward, lifting my captor up and over, into the path of the blade. He cried out in pain as it dug into his back. His grip destroyed, I sent him into the air to slam hard into his counterpart.

Neither angel stayed down long, rolling to their feet once their kinetic momentum had been broken. The one who had been holding me looked like he had already healed from the sword strike, and he pulled his own sword with a grin.

"Thanks for the blood," he said, flexing his back. "Delicious, and nutritious."

My blood. Whatever Reyzl had done, it had made them not only impervious to damage from blessed weapons, but had increased their healing rate beyond my own. I dropped into a defensive crouch, waiting for the attack that I knew would come.

They struck together, their swords thin white lines of steel arcing toward me. I ducked and dodged, twisted and danced around the blades, somehow matching the impossible speed of their motion

as I circled around the room. I could see that they were pushing me, herding me towards the wall. I couldn't play defense forever.

I reached in and found the Great Were's power. I felt the strength surge through my limbs, felt myself growing and changing. My hands stretched out into gigantic claws, my clothes tearing as my mass increased. The angels' swords whistled towards me.

I caught the first with a massive paw, the edge of the blade sinking into my flesh but nowhere near deeply enough to harm me. I closed my grip around it and held it, then sidestepped the other attack and lashed out with my other claw. It caught the angel in the face, the razor sharp fingers ripping and tearing, removing most of the head in one swipe.

No sooner had I brought my hand back when I could see the intense wound beginning to heal, the face rebuilding, the mouth opening to laugh. I wrenched the sword from the other angel's hand, flipped it in the air to take the hilt, caught it with a smaller human hand, and delivered the killing blow, removing the mutilated head before it could regenerate.

"No," the other angel cried, seeing his partner's headless corpse topple to the ground. I let the transformation reverse completely, shrinking back to my human form, reknitting my tattered clothes together, remaking myself as whole. Armed, I turned to face him.

"My condolences," I cursed, darting forward, slamming him in the face with the hilt to knock him back, then whipping the blade around and through his neck.

I didn't wait for him to fall, instead spinning around, looking for Reyzl. I found him near the Rift, speaking under his breath and scraping out another circle. He hadn't noticed what had been going on behind him and probably believed I was already dead. This would be easier than I thought.

My plan was to dash in and remove the archfiend's head before he had any idea I was still alive. It might have worked too, if he hadn't finished the circle at the same time I started towards him. The runes burst into flame, and the first of Reyzl's army stepped through. A humanoid female with scaled red skin and bright yellow eyes. It saw me as soon as it entered, letting out a cry of alarm and shoving Reyzl away from my attack.

The archfiend rolled to the side, somehow keeping his hold on the Chalice, and rose to his feet as I decapitated the demon with the cursed sword. If he was surprised to see me alive, he hid it well.

“You continue to impress me with your persistence diuscrucis,” he said with a smile. “However, I’m afraid you’re in the way.”

A second demon stepped through the Rift, then a third, a fourth. They hissed when they saw me, springing forward to attack. Reyzl bent over and placed the Chalice on the ground, then began to unbutton his suit jacket.

I did the one thing that made sense. I couldn’t fight Reyzl and an army of demons on my own, so I ran. Not to get away, but to get help. Rebecca. I raced down the corridor, the demons chasing behind, still streaming in through the Hell Rift. I heard growling as hounds joined the devils.

She was standing next to the ladder, pulling against the handcuffs that bound her, the demon Yuli perched above. He was cackling at her futile attempts to escape, hopping back and forth on the rung. They both turned to look at me as I rushed in, Yuli freezing in fear, Rebecca baring her fangs in a half-snarl, half-smile.

“Hey,” I said to her, cracking the sword down on the chain of the cuffs. Freed, she grabbed the sword from my hand.

“Hi handsome,” she said, her eyes fading to black. “Nice eyes.” She leapt forward and tore into the devils behind me.

Nice eyes? I wasn’t sure what she meant, but I didn’t have time to think about it. I heard flapping wings, and saw Yuli flying away up the shaft. He wasn’t worth chasing. I started to turn back towards the fray when I saw Obi. He was lying on the ground behind the ladder, his eyes closed, a huge bloodstain on his stomach. He was still alive, but he was out of the fight.

My anger flared and I hurried to catch up with Rebecca. I used Ulnyx’s strength to throw around the devils like rag dolls, leaving them broken for her to dispose of. I had already lost Josette, and I didn’t know how long Obi would last without help. It was time to end this.

Reyzl was waiting for us when we reached the main room. He had removed all of his clothes except his underwear, having placed them in a neat pile next to the Chalice. His body was taut with lean muscle and covered in dark scars that formed more of the demonic runes. They burned on his skin, the flames bathing him in a red glow. His hands had morphed into talons, the ends dripping demon fire.

“I’ve grown weary of you, Landon,” he said. I felt his power all around me, pressing on me in an effort to freeze me as he had done

before. I pulled on my own flow and pushed myself free, feeling his efforts dissipate from the force of my will. He observed his failure without emotion, and then launched himself at me.

I almost didn't move in time, skipping to the side as a clawed hand raked across my abdomen. I felt the tips of his hands scrape against my skin, the demon fire burning worse than any real flame. I winced in pain as I dodged a second strike and blocked a third with my forearm. The wound wasn't healing. In fact it was growing more painful as I moved.

"Does it hurt?" Reyzl asked. "You aren't as impervious as you believed."

I grunted in response, catching his arm when he threw it forward, twisting it and hearing a satisfying crack as it shattered. Reyzl moaned and backed away, his snarled lip defying his nonplussed expression.

I pressed the attack, but the arm healed almost instantly, twisting back into the proper position and coming up in time to block my punches. Each time my hand hit one of the runes I felt the pain of the demon fire biting into me. Each time I felt the pain I grew angrier. The anger made me sloppy.

An overthrown, off-balance punch later I found myself slammed up against the wall, four deep punctures in my chest and lungs, gasping for air and trying to get back up. Reyzl stood ten feet away, allowing himself just the slightest smirk while he watched me struggle.

My whole body was burning up, my soul was crying out in despair. Josette had given herself up for me, given herself up for nothing. My anger fell way, replaced by acceptance and a sudden calm. I had done my best, hadn't I? There had never been any guarantees.

I looked around for Rebecca, finding a mass of demons near the opening to the corridor but not seeing her anywhere. I wanted to tell her I was sorry, that I wished we had more time together, that I thought she and I could have been something special. I swallowed with a dry throat and licked my lips. Reyzl was still standing there, just looking at me, watching me die.

The demon fire. It was burning me up, preventing me from healing. I almost laughed when I thought of it, not that I could laugh with the holes in my lungs. I closed my eyes and relaxed, pulling on my Source and letting my focus fade. The air held

moisture, moisture meant water, and water doused fire. Could it put out demon fire? There was one way it could. Josette hadn't sacrificed herself so I would know how to fight like her. She had given herself to me for another reason, to provide me with something she knew I would need. After all, who knew the archfiend better than she did?

I reached for her power, picturing her bedroom, her simple straw doll, her carefree and safe life before her brother had become evil, before her mischief had brought down her parent's ire. I mixed it with my own, sent it out with my will, demanding the vapor in the air to condense, demanding that it rain.

My eyes were closed, but I felt my body cool and heal as the air around me began to cry. This wasn't just any rain, but holy rain, holy water, Josette's tears. I finally took a deep breath, opening my eyes to glorious chaos. In front of me, Reyzl was hunched over, trying to escape the water, his skin sizzling wherever it touched him. Behind him, the demons were rushing back towards the Hell Rift, but the rain had extinguished it. With no escape, they shrieked and howled in pain as the flesh washed off of them like dirt. Where was Rebecca?

"How?" Reyzl asked, trying to straighten up. The runes on his body had been extinguished, but he had drank my blood from the Chalice, and he was healing as fast as the water could wound him. I knew from experience how much it must hurt.

I caught the motion out of the corner of my eye. With a thought, I stopped the rain. "Something you can't begin to understand," I said to him.

"And what is that," he growled. His strength was returning, and he started moving towards me, his fury obvious despite his blank black eyes.

"Friends," I said.

He caught on too slowly, sensed her too late. An instant later Rebecca was on his back, a hand on each end of the cursed sword. She winked at me, and then pulled the blade towards herself, slicing through Reyzl's neck.

The black fog of his soul poured from the top of his headless corpse as it fell. Rebecca opened her mouth to accept it, her head tilting back in ecstasy as she absorbed the immense power of the archfiend. I sat against the wall and watched it happen, waiting for it to be done.

Then it was. The last of the black fog vanished down Rebecca's throat, and she fell to her hands and knees, her breathing heavy. I rushed over to her and put my arms around her waist, holding her steady.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She didn't respond right away. "Rebecca?"

"Just give me a minute, worm," she replied. "I think it was something I ate."

It was the perfect release. I closed my eyes and gave myself up to the joke, my laughter strong and loud. A moment later she joined me, laughing weakly, then coughing, then laughing again.

"Help me up?" she asked.

I let go of her waist and circled around in front of her. She reached up and took my hand, and I pulled her to her feet. She stumbled as she rose, so I wrapped her arm over my shoulder to support her.

"Nice work," I said.

"You almost killed me with that rain," she said. "I was lucky to duck under the sofa before I got too beat up."

"I'm sorry Becca," I replied. "I couldn't think of anything else."

She shifted her weight so she could drag my head down to hers. She kissed me hungrily. "Apology accepted," she said. "It all worked out."

"Reyzl?" I asked.

"I took his power," she said. "Let's grab the Chalice and get out of here."

We walked over to where the Chalice sat on the floor next to the Hell Rift, surrounded by the wet ash of the demons killed by the holy water, and filled with the water itself.

"I've got it," Rebecca said, bending over to pick it up. She couldn't reach it with her arm around me, so she pulled away to bend down further.

"I know this is going to sound corny," I started saying as she grasped the Chalice by the stem and turned it over to dump out the holy water, "and the timing kind of stinks, but I was thinking maybe you and I could, you know, be together. See how it goes?"

"I'm sorry, Landon," she replied.

Huh? I wasn't expecting the rejection. "I don't understand," I said. No reply. "Rebecca?"

That was when I noticed the flames of the runes around the Hell

Rift had reignited. She turned to face me, her eyes as black as night, her expression sad but strong. She shifted forward and the pain in my stomach was renewed. Her claws made a sick sucking sound when she removed them from my gut. Blood ran down over my wet clothes, down into the Chalice.

"What are you doing?" I asked her. I didn't even see her other hand sweep up behind me, her claws digging into my neck. My spinal cord severed, I dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, lifting the Chalice to her mouth and pouring the contents down her throat. After she swallowed, she dropped the Chalice to the ground.

"Why?" I asked.

"Survival," she said. Without another word she stepped into the Hell Rift and was gone.

Physically, I couldn't feel anything. Emotionally, I had just been ripped in half. She had saved my life more than once. She had been my friend, my companion, and I had hoped she would be something more. I had trusted her with my life, trusted her despite the fact that she was a vampire, a creature of evil. I had told Josette she was different. She was supposed to be different. I wanted to believe that absorbing Reyzl's soul had done something to her, that there was no other explanation. As much as I hated it, I was having trouble with that. When she had said she was sorry, she had been lying.

I lay there alone, waiting for my body to heal, not knowing if I would ever see her again. The tears ran unabated from my eyes, and I didn't think they would ever stop.

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Book Two: Betrayal

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I couldn't remember the last time I slept. I couldn't remember what it felt like to have a mattress beneath me, to close my eyes and dream of something that had some kind of importance, or at the very least provided relief from the emptiness of being awake. I couldn't fathom the idea of finding peace in the darkness, quiet for my always waking mind or comfort for my weary soul. Sleep was for people, not for me. Now it was just wishful thinking, a memory veiled in the darkness that never came.

Memories. They dragged on me like a thousand-ton anvil. Except, I could move a thousand-ton anvil. I was stuck with the memories.

I was crouched on the extended precipice of an office building, a neo-gothic behemoth of steel and glass and reflection. In front of me were mirrored windows that were meant to hide the inside world from the outside world. I suppose it was apropos that I could look right through them. I could see the angels gathered inside. I could feel the demons headed their way.

They were coming from the basement, scaling the inside of the

elevator shafts with ease. Three dozen at least, summoned from Hell by a fallen angel who had been tipped off to the meeting. I didn't know how. Maybe if Obi and I were still speaking regularly, I could have asked him. I'm sure he had the answer. It didn't matter. One thing at a time.

In my mind, I always returned to the same place. I wondered how things might have been different if I had been as Aware as Dante had claimed I was. I never saw Rebecca's betrayal coming. I was blinded by her beauty, taken by her artful deception. She hadn't even needed to use her succubus wiles on me.

Dante had warned me, and I had blown it, big time. He hadn't saved any breath in reminding me that he told me to be careful trusting her. Yeah, I had gotten the Grail back and had hid it someplace that I hoped nobody would ever find it. What I had lost in payment for my efforts, that was a bigger bitch than she had turned out to be.

The angels were gathered around a simple desk, staring at a computer monitor. There were four of them, three I recognized. They were wearing business suits, carrying briefcases, looking like a quartet of ordinary human MBAs gathered for a quick presentation. Their wings were little more than slight bulges under the clothes, their swords banished to their hiding place in Heaven. They were experienced, long-term seraphim. Like Josette had been.

Sitting in a leather executive chair in front of them was a Touched woman, Rachel Taylor, a Bruce Wayne type philanthropist and businesswoman. She was showing them how her charities were performing, and they were grinning and nodding in their pleasure. I was sure they had to know the demons were coming, but maybe they didn't. I had lost that perspective a couple of years ago.

Five years. That's how long it had been since the betrayal. I had to remind myself sometimes, because lately all of the days just seemed to coalesce into one another; into a single never ending mixture of color and grayscale. I liked to tell myself that it had been Rebecca's double-cross that had brought me here, but I liked to lie to myself these days. That had been the icing, the cherry, and the straw. I had lost Josette, Obi had never been the same, and frankly, having the long term memories of an angel and a demon rattling around in my skull full-time still made it a challenge to keep my sense of self. In the quieter moments, I could hear their whispers in my mind, their conflicting alignments arguing like a bad cliche.

I stopped peering through the mirrored glass and looked into it instead, at my reflection. My eyes had changed that day. Once upon a time they were both blue, but now one was the amazing dancing gold of an angel, the other the burning red of a demon. Balance. I nearly spat at the thought. Balance was the Universe's cruel joke. I guess I was the punchline.

One of the angels swiveled their heads, looking out of the window, turning directly towards me. I leaped up and grabbed onto the rope I had secured to the rooftop, my feet tapping lightly on the floor above them. I didn't care if he had seen me or not, but it would sure make things easier if he hadn't. He hadn't.

Josette. I had tried to speak to her after she had given her soul to me. I could hear those whispers and so many times I thought I could whisper back. I had tried to whisper back, but she had never answered. That hadn't stopped her memories from flooding into me, usually triggered by a thought, a word, the environment, anything. At that moment I was her, in that time and place, losing myself completely.

I let go of the rope and landed back on the precipice without a sound. The angels were distracted now; they had finally picked up the signal of the onrushing evil, and had taken up defensive positions. One stood on either side of the elevator to ambush the demons when they burst in, the other two took position in front of the desk, protecting Rachel. For her part, she had pulled a pair of revolvers from her desk drawer and had them trained on the elevator. Silver bullets, I was sure. They were poorly prepared.

The demons were only a few floors down now, a mass of heat to my senses. Thanks to Ulnyx, I could pick them out by scent. It was a standard assault group, a front-line of fodder demons to get killed in the ambush, a second wave of devil warriors, and a fallen angel Commanding them. Thirty-six against four and a half. It would have been a pretty fair fight, not really the demonic style.

Rebecca. The last time I had seen her, she had left me paralyzed on the floor, waiting for my spinal cord to re-attach itself while she had taken a rift-ride to Hell. Initially, I had thought that it was because she knew it was the only way to escape and keep me from following. I had told myself that she would come back, that the power she had taken from Reyzl had left her confused. It was a stupid conjecture meant to salve the emotional wound, a stubborn denial that the demon who had made me feel more alive after death

than I had during life wasn't a slave to the promise of power like all of the others. But the years had gone by, and she had remained in perdition. Mr. Ross had reported as much to Dante, though he knew only that she was seeking some kind of knowledge that couldn't be gathered in the mortal world. What kind, he couldn't say. Dante had total faith in his Collector, but over the years it had seemed to me that his reports were always a little bit short, that there always seemed to be something missing. Or maybe that was just my general paranoia.

Her absence hadn't been a total loss. Without the transferred memories and power of generations of Solen offspring, the family had fallen into a state of disarray, a shadow of their former glory, caught in the middle of a power struggle that had left them squabbling over scraps. Reyzl's death had created a similar power vacuum amongst the higher order demons, and even now fiends and fallen angels alike were vying to take up the role, while at the same time hoping it was captured by someone else first to see how I would react. The impending attack on the angels was a standard sortie to flex some muscle. At least, it was to them.

The demons had reached their floor. The elevator doors would slip open any moment, and the battle would begin. I knew why the demons were there. I didn't need Obi for everything, after all I had my share of experience hacking networks and surfing the black oceans on the dark side of the Internet. It was time for me to act.

I focused my will on the mirrored glass. My technique had improved over the years, and where once I would have just blown the crystals to shards or dust, now I superheated them, liquified them, and watched the window melt away. I slipped in behind Rachel at the same moment the elevator doors were thrown open along their tracks. Before the angels could start hacking at the fodder, I allowed myself to be Seen.

It was like a shockwave that burst out from my physical displacement, causing the angels to stop all thoughts of attacking the demons and turn my way, and making the incoming fodder stumble into the room, and then change course in a desperate effort to get back out.

Five years had been plenty of time to pick up some new tricks. One of them was being able to close myself off from being sensed by other Divine. Acquiring the trick had been an interesting exercise, since it required first an understand of how Divine Sight

worked, and second an extremely fine control over the strands of power that fed into my physical representation through my soul.

In the beginning, it had been a source of confusion that the Divine struggled to recognize me correctly, in some cases thinking I was a demon, in others an angel. I had learned since that each form of power had its own unique signature, in some ways like how you could use radar to tell what kind of plane you were looking at, even though you couldn't see it. Except, in the early days the Divine had been picking up my nascent output, the purgatorial balance of the powers fluctuating ever-so-slightly depending on my current state of mind.

Later, I had learned to control the output, and could neutralize it such that I still appeared as Divine; my true identity as a diuscrucis. The real fun had come from my experiments with mixing Josette and Ulnyx's energy into the general flow. After a lot of trial and error and with Sarah's help, I had discovered I could effectively negate myself entirely to the senses of other Divine, and just as importantly, I could mimic different signatures. It wasn't very useful against the more powerful players, but it had its moments.

I waited while the fodder demons retreated. I stood motionless until the fallen angel had made his way into the room, his devil warriors lining up behind him. I glanced over at Rachel. She had put the guns onto the desk and was facing me with a look of fearful apprehension.

"Diuscrucis," the fallen angel said. I knew this one too. Alyle. "Who are you fighting for?"

I looked around the room, soaking in the smell of fear and uncertainty, the smell of hopefulness. It was the burning question whenever I showed up where both factions clashed. Which side would I be aligning with today? Where did the balance rest? For the first two years, I had been a staunch ally for the angels. I had killed more demons than I could count. I had freed them up to take on their more peaceful pursuits in the name of goodness. The killing had been great for them but had left me tired and empty. The idea of my eternal future being predicated by violence was less than appealing.

For two years after I had declared peace. I had disappeared from the fight, an observer to the balance that kept mankind in control of their own destiny. I had spent much of that time seeking knowledge. The knowledge that Charis had told me I would seek.

The Demon Queen. I had solved that riddle after I had seen my eyes. I still hadn't solved the mystery she had so desperately wanted me to. I still didn't know how to find her. After she had given me the Grail, she had vanished again. Even Mr. Ross didn't know where to.

It was Dante who had pushed me to get back out into the field. He was worried that both factions were getting too comfortable again. I had spent a year picking sides, at first with a clear goal in mind, and then almost randomly depending on my mood when the fight broke out. Tonight I was trying out a new tactic.

I looked at Rachel again. "Please get under the desk," I said.

She glanced over to the angels on the other side of the workspace, then dropped to her knees and crawled under it.

"Diuscrucis?" one of the angels asked. Silas. He had replaced Moses as the elder seraph at the Catskill Sanctuary. An old, wise angel, we had worked together a number of times.

I reached behind my back, unclipping the simple, mortal sword from its sheath and holding it up in front of me. I traced the polished steel with my eyes. No runes, no magic, just straight up sharp, pointy metal.

"Myself," I said, leaping over the desk and removing Silas' head. In the same motion, I pulled one of the revolvers to me, firing a bullseye right between Alyle's eyes. It wouldn't kill the demon, but it sent the desired message.

The angels turned on me. The devils turned on me. For a moment they forgot about their own war. For once there was a more important threat. I let off the remaining five rounds in the revolver, perfect hits on five of the devils, and then roared, my body shifting and growing, turning into something wholly inhuman; a massive form of muscle and strength and bone. I felt a sword dig deep into my thigh, but I ignored it. I pounced forward and ripped into the devils, my massive claws shredding them.

They tried to run, but the elevator shaft was small, and it made a lousy escape route. I smothered them with my size and speed, tearing and ripping into them with a visceral fury that rose into my consciousness whenever I took the Great Were's natural form.

I could smell the angels regrouping behind me, organizing themselves for a combined attack on my flank. Alyle was with them, joining in their fight against me, accepting their wordless request for help. It was an interesting development. It wouldn't help

them. I crushed the final two devils, and then gave up Ulnyx's form, becoming man-sized once more. I pulled my sword to me and stood stiff straight before the remaining angels.

"Why?" the fallen angel asked. I knew the question would be echoing through all of their minds.

"Balance," I said. I had learned that it was the answer to everything that didn't make sense.

I danced forward, a black clothed blur through the line of angels. They fought well, but Josette had been the best of them before she had become part of me, before my own power had been mixed with hers. It was over in a blink.

I took a cloth from my jeans pocket and wiped down the blade, and then dropped it to the floor. I returned the sword to the scabbard on my back. The angels were already dissolving, first to dust, then to nothing.

I walked over to the desk. "You can come out now," I said to Rachel. I could hear her knees sliding along the floor, and then her head popped up over the edge of the desk.

Forty-five years old, short brown hair cut in a bob, brown eyes, a little overweight. She was intelligent, compassionate, and a staunch supporter of good. She put her hands on the desk and pulled herself to her feet. She knew I wasn't going to kill her, so her fear had fallen to the background.

"Balance?" she asked.

I sighed. "The cause and the effect," I said. "I've been thinking about how to resolve it."

She tilted her head. "So you've decided just to kill everything?"

"Not everything. You're still alive," I said.

She frowned. "What happened to you?" she asked.

Where should I start? I had met Rachel only a few months after I had recovered the Grail. She had been instrumental in providing the resources I had needed to reset the balance - finances, transportation, information when she had it, and something more.

"I always told you that things would change when the balance was reached," I said.

"You know that's not what I'm talking about," she replied.

I knew, but I didn't want to talk about it. Rachel had been there for me when I had needed a friend more than anything. No, not a friend. A mother of sorts. She had done a better job in the few years I had known her than my biological mother ever had. She was one

of the few who could even pretend to understand what it was like to be me. That I was unable to relate to her, to be close to her, to even remember what that was...

"Landon," she said, her voice concerned. It snapped me out of my useless introspection.

"Memories," I said at last. "I've tried to fight them, but I can't escape. I'm tired of trying."

Charis had known what would happen. She had known because she had gone through it. Maybe it had taken her almost two hundred years, but she wasn't me. I had never handled it well. I tried so hard to handle it, but I was drowning. I knew the knowledge she was waiting for me to find would be my salvation. It had to be.

"There's something else I need," I said, shaking off the heaviness. "Your database."

Rachel looked back at her computer monitor. "My database? What for?"

Whispers and hope. My search for information had brought me to Shanghai, China, where I had spoken to a minor fiend who also happened to be one of the Asian archfiend's top spies. He had told me of the whispers. That the angels were passing encrypted messages through the most benign pathways. That not all of the angels knew about it. I suspected that Rachel's charity's financial transactions might be one of their transports.

"Research," I said.

She looked back at me. "Let me help you," she said. "I know I don't understand what you're going through, but you need someone to ground you."

"No," I replied. "You can't help me like that now that the balance is steady. Even if you could, if you did you would fall. I know how old you really are. You wouldn't survive." I reached into a pocket and pulled out a thumb drive. I handed it to her. "Please, just copy your database to the drive."

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2

I walked out of the Taylor building through the front door, a loaded USB drive tucked away in my leather jacket's inside pocket. I slipped across the street and looked up towards the top of the building, expecting to see Rachel standing at the window, waiting for me to step out into the night. She wasn't there. Unexpected, but not surprising.

I had been holding two bases of operation for the last five years. The first was the hidden excavation beneath the Statue of Liberty, where Rebecca had once lived. The second was my original room near the top of the Belmont Hotel. Rachel had spent months of her life trying to talk me into moving to a different location - she had gone so far as to offer me the penthouse of one of the residential towers her corporation owned. It had been tempting in the beginning, but what kind of mortal comforts did I need? I didn't sleep. I didn't eat. I didn't even void. I was a ghost with mass and kinetic energy.

The Belmont was familiar, and I could still feel the charge in the air from the night I had spent learning swordplay with Josette. I

didn't know if it was real, or my memories making it real. Either way I didn't care. It was comfortable. The Statue... Everything about the Statue oozed Rebecca, right down to the bottle of perfume she had kept in the nightstand drawer next to her bed. I didn't sit there and sniff it or anything as forlorn as that. What I had done was study her books, study the runes, and keep up the hope that one of these days I'd go down there and she'd be there waiting. Waiting to explain what she had done, and why. It was almost as big of a mystery to me as Charis' words.

"Survival," she had said. It could mean so many things. I had thought she had allied with me because I was her best shot at it. Obviously, I had been wrong.

I had been too sensitive. I had cared too much, too quickly. I had gotten burned by mortal fire, burned by hellfire, burned by trust. You couldn't fight the Divine and care about anything. The alternative was to suffer pain and loss over, and over, and over again. When it was one of the only things that could hurt you, feelings became the enemy. Like I said, I liked to lie to myself.

I felt a slight pressure in my head and a tingle that floated down my spine towards the place that I identified as my soul's cage. I couldn't help but smile. I sat down cross-legged in the center of the street, ignoring the cars that swerved smoothly around me.

"I'm here Sarah," I said, opening myself up to the connection.

"Hey, Landon," Sarah said, her voice clear in my mind.

She had changed so much since the first time we had met, when she had helped me find the answers I didn't even know I was seeking. She had been a child then, but never just a child. She was a true diuscrucis, the only one in existence, born of the non-consensual union between a demon and an angel. The angel was Josette. The demon was Gervais, her brother, an archfiend operating out of Paris, France. I had never confronted him for fear of revealing Sarah. That didn't mean I didn't know where he was.

Josette had asked me to protect her. Sarah herself had named me protector before I had even known it would come to be. Could she see the future? She said she couldn't, but she was the one person who could lie to me. If she could, she never let on.

"What's up kiddo?" I asked.

The only time I could feel my soul breathing was when Sarah connected to me. I was her protector, and I would never let her see me sweat, never let her see what my world had become.

“Just checking up on you. When are you coming by to do some more of that ninja training of yours?” she said.

Her voice was light, cheerful. So unlike how she had been the first time we had met. Knowing she was safe had allowed her to grow, to blossom, and to live as though she were almost normal. She was still residing underground with the other Awake, but she went to High School, had mortal friends, and even mortal crushes. Nobody in the world knew she was different except me, though she needed to be more careful about not revealing her ability to See.

I reached into my pocket and touched the USB drive. “I’m doing great sweets,” I said, pushing my mental voice up an octave to sound more chipper than I felt. “Maybe tomorrow night? I’m on my way back to the Belmont to do some research.”

I had spent hundreds of hours over the last three years teaching Sarah everything I... no, her mother knew about fighting. I found a certain measure of comfort in being able to give her something of Josette’s that she could hold on to, even if she didn’t know, or at least didn’t say she knew, where that particular skillset had come from.

Her laughter boomed in my head. “You’re sitting in the middle of traffic,” she said. “Do you have to do that?”

It was one of the differences between a directly descended diuscrucis and a facsimile like me. She knew exactly where I was, all of the time. All she had to do was think about me, and she could See me. I couldn’t do the same, but I knew it brought her great comfort to always know where I was.

“To be honest, I hadn’t even thought about it,” I admitted, getting back to my feet and finishing my trip across the road. I had become so accustomed to the mortal world circulating around me, at times I almost forgot it even existed. “How was school today?”

“It’s always an adventure,” she said. “Katie Winslow and her gang tried to prank me again by swapping my Coke for a can of urine. Somehow it ended up on Katie’s head. Just because they think I’m blind doesn’t mean I have no sense of smell.”

I laughed. A rarity these days, unheard of unless I was talking to Sarah. She had gotten into a couple of scrapes with the school princess already, mainly owing to her perceived disability and the complete lack of imaginative mischief that stemmed from it. She had always gotten the upper hand, and her payback was well measured and deserved.

“What did the principal say?” I asked.

She laughed again. “He said I should have made her drink it. I’m not the only one she tries to torment, I’m just the only one who fights back.”

“I’m sure you’d love nothing more than to put your foot up her ass,” I said. She had expressed as much in the past, but doing so would risk giving up her faux blindness. How would she explain *that* away?

“I’ve been thinking about that. What I’d love to do even more is Command her to put her foot up her own ass.”

The statement made me raise an eyebrow. Even though she was a diuscrucis, she had always leaned good. The way she took care of the Awake down in the tunnels, her desire to help her fellow targets at school. Commanding was a demonic ability, and not one to be used lightly. It was out of character.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

There was the slightest pause. Just long enough for me to know she wasn’t. “I’m fine, brother,” she said. “I’m just getting fed up with that witch and her cackling minions. Anyway, I’m headed to bed. I wanted to check in on you and say goodnight.”

I could feel the temporary relief waning into the background at the words. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know they were coming. “Goodnight, sister,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she replied. I expected her to break the connection, but there was a pause. When her mental voice returned, it was hushed. “Brother, be careful. You may find the answers that you seek, but you may also wish you hadn’t.”

I wanted to ask her what she meant, what she had seen or felt about my future. I couldn’t, because she broke the connection. That was something else she had me beat on. The call was one way. I briefly considered heading underground, but there was no point. If she had wanted to say more, she would have.

“I love you too.”

The words echoed in my mind, bringing back a familiar memory that didn’t belong to me. I found desperate purchase against the wall of the nearest building, trying to ground myself before the past could overtake me. My vision went dark, the sounds of the city fading out and history, terrible history taking its place.

* * *

I'm on a bed, my thighs are bloodied. The Archfiend takes my newborn baby and hands her off to his servant Izak.

He rounds on me, smiles and laughs. He is handsome, with a mop of curly black hair and delicate features. His nearly naked body is lean and strong and covered in runes. He's carrying a wicked looking dagger in one hand, a decanter of water in the other.

He puts the tip of the dagger at my foot and eases it upward, the tip digging in just enough to make me bleed. When the poison begins to spread, he pours the holy water over it, filling my senses with the smell of frankincense, filling my body with even more pain. I'm already healing from the birth, my stomach shrinking so unnaturally, my muscles tightening and reforming back into my petite young visage.

"I have heard that the diuscrucis were banned by Heaven and Hell because of the power they hold as mortals, and the infinite power they can command as Divine," he says. The dagger reaches my inner thigh. "I am eager to see how I might use such a tool."

I don't move. It isn't because I can't, but because I know that resisting would be useless. This is his home, his domain, and if I want to live to see my daughter again I have to be cautious. "Please don't hurt her Gervais," I say, tears welling in my eyes.

He stops the motion of the dagger and leans in close, his blood-red eyes only inches from my own. "Sweet Josette," he says. "I won't hurt her."

His words are a lie. I know it, but I'm powerless. The tears flow more freely. The knife moves up my abdomen, coming to rest over my heart.

"I'm not going to kill you," he says. "Even I'm not monster enough to kill my own flesh and blood. I want you to know that I could have. That I have shown you mercy today. I want you to know that you have a daughter, and that she is in my care."

The words are worse than a dagger in my heart. He lifts the blade and places it and the decanter on a small table. He leans in again and puts his lips to mine. I return his kiss, knowing the consequences for denial. He moans. I cry. He breaks the kiss and puts his hands under my small body, careful not to damage my wings. He carries me over to the window. I can see the city off in the distance.

"Do not come back here," he says. "I will kill her if you do."

He throws me out the window.

At first I move horizontally, and then I begin to fall. Instinct takes over. My wings spread, catch the currents of air, and lift me back into the sky. No longer trapped by his power, I close my eyes and will myself

back to Heaven.

* * *

When I regained myself, I was holding crumbled mortar, my tension causing me to dig deeply into the cement. The tears were streaming from my eyes, the same way they had the dozens of times I'd been assaulted by that memory. I fought the emotions, forcing them back down into my soul.

"Josette," I whispered, hoping that maybe this time she would respond. She didn't. I steadied myself, wiped my eyes, and took a deep breath. I had work to do.

The Belmont Hotel hadn't changed much in the five years I had been there, outside of the police tape cordoning off the entire 'penthouse'. I had put the tape there to keep the druggies, alkies, and whores away from anything they could hurt themselves on. I had added runes to the doors to ensure that the deterrents didn't need to be effective.

As usual, I entered through the roof, gaining access from the neighboring building and leaping across the gap. I took the stairs down and put my hand against the hinges of the door, defusing the metal so I could push it open, checking the runes inside the frame, and re-soldering the hinge on the other side. The process seemed complicated, but it only took me half a second to complete.

I had torn down every wall on the floor that wasn't weight-carrying, leaving myself with a large, almost labyrinthine studio which in the early days after the betrayal I had used to practice my craft, refine my control, and make sure I was never left powerless again. The space was nearly empty, with the exception of a small desk with a task chair and a laptop, a mattress on the floor that hadn't been used in years, an old wooden steamer trunk, and a literal pile of weapons. Not just cursed and blessed pointed blades, but also assault rifles, handguns, and a number of other tools of violence. Some might have said that I kept the instruments of pain as trophies, but I had destroyed so many others it made the pile look like a pittance.

The reason I kept them wasn't clear to me, but it was a compulsion I didn't see a need to deny. They came from angels, demons, vampires, werewolves, the Turned and the Touched. They came from mortals too; I hadn't limited my work to the Divine,

especially when it came to violence against the innocent. On some level the stack reminded me of my purpose, a unique installation that spoke of what I had become. I unstrapped the sword from my back, and threw it onto the pile. Take the weapons away from the killers, and then use them to kill. Balance.

I looked over at the steamer trunk. I had found it at Obscura Antiques in the East Village, a popular shop that specialized in oddities and abnormal relics. What had made it special to them was the intricately carved series of patterns that when looked at from a certain angle bore an uncanny resemblance to the Virgin Mary. What had attracted me to it was that the carvings were seraphim runes of power. They rendered the trunk both indestructible and secure, able to be opened only by the angel or part-angel who traced the runes on the front in a unique pattern.

I had spent three months tracking its origins backward. It hadn't always been a steamer trunk; the wood had originally been installed on Pope Urban's carriage, protecting him from danger both mortal and Divine while he would travel the countryside. I didn't know who had reconstructed it in its current form. It's discovery had been a bit of good fortune and a bit of gathered knowledge.

That knowledge had come from the contents of the trunk; hundreds of books, scrolls, and ancient pages that I had spent the better part of my two years on hiatus collecting, studying, and organizing. Some I had stolen from Universities, some from museums, and others I had tracked down in the possession of an assortment of demons and angels. The demons had been happy to trade the parcels for their lives. The angels had been more stubborn, and an unfortunate number had died not even knowing what it was they were protecting. In the beginning, I had felt some semblance of guilt, but Charis had been right; it was all a matter of perspective.

As for the texts, I knew they were a clue to the knowledge that she had wanted me to find. I had happened on it almost by accident. One of Rebecca's books had included a reference to a scroll I now had in my possession. The reference had included an image, and the image had included an emblem, drawn so small on the paper that no human hand could have been responsible, and no mortal eyes could have seen it regardless. The emblem was a rune, similar to the number seven, with a zig-zag on the top line and a sharp diagonal slipping up and to the left from the foot. It appeared on all of the texts I had collected, and nowhere else.

I didn't know what it meant, who had created it, or how to interpret it, but I was sure it was connected to Charis. I had spent nearly three years learning as much about the Divine on Earth as I could. I had followed thousands of dead ends, discovered leads and connections hidden across the mythology of human culture both ancient and contemporary, studied demonic and angelic texts, and learned to read as much of both languages as possible without a complete reference translation. It was the only character I had ever found secretly emblazoned across every level of divinity and humanity, carefully placed on specific pages of specific texts, the resultant strings creating a dialog of some kind. I couldn't decipher it, because there was one string missing. One resource I had yet to find, an unknown item that held the key to learning the truth and finding myself once more. Even if I had it, I didn't know if I would be able to solve the encryption, but I had to try.

I grabbed the USB drive from my pocket, hopped onto the task chair, and slid the device into the laptop. I typed in my password and navigated through to the drive. There was one file on it, a two hundred gigabyte flat file of transaction data. It was going to be a long night. Then again, they all were.

If there was a pattern to the data, I was having trouble finding it. IDs, dates, and dollar amounts streamed down the screen, scrolling for almost forever. I pored through the information, tried to match up dates to dollar amounts, dollar amounts to other dollar amounts, ids to dates and so on. The second most important lesson I had learned was patience. I had eternity to try to work it out.

The pressure in my head broke me out of my digital trance. I blinked for the first time since I had sat down and opened up my soul to Sarah's request.

"*I'm here* ," I said to her, reaching up and hitting the power button for the monitor. Twenty hours. I was supposed to meet Sarah for training an hour ago.

"*You're supposed to be here* ," Sarah said, her voice trembling. "*Something's wrong.* "

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3

I took a deep breath, a feeling of worry crossing my deadened threshold.

"*I'm on my way* ," I said, already headed for the door. "*What happened?* "

"*Kelsie. She's one of my children. She's missing.* "

The words spilled out in a tumble of fear, worry, and guilt. I slipped through the door and leaped off the side of the stairwell, focusing on breaking my fall, and landing tenderly at the bottom of the steps. I blasted through the lobby and out the front door, not even giving the latest Punkmo a chance to see what had caused the disturbance.

Kelsie belonged to Trish, an Awake vagrant who had learned too late not to talk about the Divine. She had spent three years committed, and had nowhere to go once she had been released. She sold herself on the street to make money, and Kelsie was the result. Sarah had fallen in love with the little girl in an instant, and had taken the pair into her refuge. That had been a year ago. Sarah spoiled the little girl whenever she could, and in return Kelsie had

taken to calling her “auntie.” She loved that.

“*When was the last time you saw her?* ” I asked. I bent down and lifted the manhole cover, slipped in and replaced it. It was about a mile down to the village. I focused, feeling the strength pouring into my legs.

“*Before I left for school* ,” she said between sobs. “*She said goodbye to me. Trish said they went out to panhandle. Someone distracted her. When she turned around, Kelsie was gone.* ”

I turned the corner, not slowing at all when I reached the huge open cavern that was Sarah’s home. Once it had housed a hundred people at most, but it had grown in the last five years. Nearly six hundred lived here now, gathering water and electricity from lines run long ago to a now forgotten generating station. The Awake looked up at me, some with fear, some with admiration. They scurried out of the way as I approached.

“I’m here,” I said out loud, pushing open the flap to Sarah’s tent in the center of the small city. Sarah was sitting on the floor, her arms around Trish. I saw Izak sitting in the back corner of the tent, his body expressionless, but his eyes betraying the sadness that he felt at Sarah’s pain.

Sarah dropped her connection to my soul. She looked up at me with her empty eyes. I felt another pang of hurt that mirrored Izak’s. She eased herself out of Trish’s embrace, stood up, and fell towards me.

The refugee camp wasn’t the only thing that had grown. Sarah had gone from a young girl to a young woman; her body lithe and strong like her mother’s, her face proud and defined like her father’s. Her once pigtailed hair fell to her shoulders in highlighted ringlets, and I was sure the tight jeans and black t-shirt she was wearing were getting her plenty of appreciative looks. I caught her in my arms and held her, kissing the top of her head and stroking her back.

“I’ll find her,” I said.

I looked at Trish. The emaciated blonde woman remained hunched over on the floor in silence, her body wracked with distress.

“I’ll find her,” I repeated.

Sarah backed away from me and returned to Trish’s side. “Tell him where you were,” she said to the woman.

It took Trish a few tries to compose herself enough to speak.

“Penn Station,” she said. “We were working the afternoon crowd, trying to get some money for the community. This guy bumped into me, I got knocked down. By the time I got back up, Kelsie was gone. I screamed her name. I looked for her. I grabbed a policeman, but he thought I was hallucinating or something. Oh, Kelsie.” Her sobs started anew.

I wasn’t going to tell Sarah, but that wasn’t the first time I heard the story. Young girls had been disappearing across the city for the last six weeks or so, stolen right out from under their parents’ noses. I had considered looking into it earlier but hadn’t acted. Karma didn’t exist, but it was still a bitch.

“I’ll go down to Penn and see if I can pick up a trail,” I said. “You didn’t sense any Divine?”

Trish shook her head. As an Awake she knew we existed, and she could feel when we were around. I hadn’t expected her to have sensed one, or she wouldn’t have been there. The Awake avoided Divine with even more fervor than they avoided the Sleeping. My killer was a plain, ordinary mortal, which meant he should be easy enough to track down.

“I’m coming with you,” Sarah said, her voice firm. She was trying to preempt my objection. She failed.

“You’re not coming with me,” I said. “You know the stations are dangerous.”

I wish I had known how dangerous the stations were when I had asked Obi to meet me at Grand Central that first time. They had only recently re-opened the tracks that had been demolished by my inadvertent expulsion of power.

“I can take care of myself,” she argued. It was predictable.

There were only a few kinds of demons who could stay in the mortal dimension full-time without a more powerful demon to keep them alive. Vampires, werewolves, and nightstalkers were the most prevalent of the Devil’s children. Then there were the fiends - they had been human once, died and gone to Hell, and had begged to be sent back to continue their dirty deeds.

All of them preferred to stay out of the light as much as possible, but the stations were the hunting grounds of the nightstalkers; powerful humanoids that were more often associated with the term ‘zombies’. They weren’t the shuffling, stupid, brain-eating variety. They were the Devil’s first earthly creation, and while they ran more on instinct than intelligence, they were fast, strong, and silent.

They would be a threat to me in a large enough group. Sarah had power, but her body was mortal and couldn't heal.

"I can Command them," she said, either reading my mind or getting ahead of my thoughts.

"How many?" I asked. Nightstalkers hunted in groups. I didn't have the power to Command, but I knew that it meant dedicating a piece of the mind to keeping the target under control, like a computer dedicating memory to each running application. There was a limit.

"I don't know," Sarah said, growing frustrated. Her eyes were still streaming tears. "She's one of my children," she shouted. "I will come with you."

I felt the immense pressure in my head, and I had to close my eyes to fight it. When I opened them, I was angry. I almost didn't recognize the feeling.

"I'm sorry, brother," Sarah said, reading my anger. "Kelsie." Her voice trailed off.

My anger faded at once. "I'll be back soon," I said.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around, finding myself face to face with Izak. The vagrant demon had a sword in his other hand.

"He wants to come with you," Sarah said. "He wants to be my eyes."

I glanced back at Sarah. Another manifestation of the evil part of her nature, or just normal teenage rebellion? I knew she had a connection to the demon, similar to the one shared by fiends and their familiars. Did she Command him, or did he volunteer?

"Fine," I said.

I didn't care at all if Izak were killed, but I shouldn't have been so callous towards the demon. Memories of his kindness to Josette circulated through my consciousness. He had been her single source of true companionship in the year that the angel was held captive by her sibling. At first, he had only been her jailor, a silent observer to Gervais's nightly visits and their painful results. Over time he had becoming something more, a caretaker of sorts, always there to lend a comforting shoulder to cry on, a kind touch, a calm and peaceful presence to help offset the chaotic violence of the archfiend.

The gentle devotion had transferred from mother to daughter, and Izak had been tireless in his efforts to protect Sarah. He deserved respect for that, and at least a small amount of sympathy.

Gervais had cut out the fiend's tongue in fear that he would one day attempt to usurp him.

I put my hand on top of his and looked into his eyes. I could feel his desire to help Sarah, but there was something else there too. She *had* Commanded him. He didn't want to leave her side, to leave her unguarded. It was hard enough for him when she went topside to live her mortal life. I saw something else there that I wasn't expecting. Recognition. He saw Josette.

Sarah and I had never spoken of the events leading up to the change in my appearance. She had known my purpose before I had, and I'd always imagined she knew the outcome. Even so, did she know Josette was her mother? I doubted it. I squeezed Izak's hand, feeling the bones crunching below the skin.

"Don't tell her," I whispered. "Not now."

He didn't register the pain, but he did give me a quick nod.

"We'll be back soon," I said, letting go of Izak's hand and heading for the exit.

"Be safe, brother," Sarah said. She gave me a weak smile, flicked her eyes at Izak, and returned to comforting Trish.

My initial plan was to make my way out of the sewers and back up into the city, crossing over to thirty-fourth and seventh at ground level. Izak had a different idea. I had grabbed onto one of the ladders leading to the surface, but he put his hand on my shoulder again and squeezed it. When I looked at him, he pointed up at the manhole cover and put his hands over his eyes, and then motioned down the tunnel.

"You know another way?" I asked.

He nodded.

I followed.

Izak's route quickly got me lost. The demon led me through a mazelike traversal of twists and turns, through knee-deep wastewater and large brick connection tunnels that were part of the New York underground's original construction. The sheer size of the system was something residents took for granted every day, except when heavy rains would back up the city's pumps and cause sewage to spill into the surrounding rivers. I didn't take it for granted, but I did lament the fact that if whoever had taken Kelsie had brought her down here she would be difficult to find. This was the perfect hiding place for demon or human, a seemingly endless conglomerate of tunnels, tubes, pipes, passageways and doorways,

with lots of random egress points to the city above.

I kept my senses focused around us, not wanting to be surprised by anything we might come across. I knew there were nightstalkers down here. I had already destroyed a group that had gotten too aggressive in their abductions and had been pulling people from the platforms while they waited to board the trains. It seemed Izak knew how to get around them, because the trek was uneventful.

We stopped at a heavy metal door. Izak looked at me and pointed at it, making a pulling motion. I could feel the vibration of the subway rattling the narrow, pipe filled corridor we were standing in. The demon stepped aside so I could squeeze by him to get to the door. I grabbed the handle and pulled. The door wasn't going anywhere without some help.

I focused on the hinges, willing the rust that had stuck the door to accelerate in its aging, pushing it past its corrosive half-life and crumbling it to dust. The rumble was growing, and I could hear the train approaching on the other side of the door. I pulled it open.

We were greeted with a blast of hot air, and then the echoing pulse of the subway's horn blasted into the tunnel. I held my arm out to keep Izak from coming through, pressing myself back while the train rocketed past. I stepped out and jumped onto the tracks behind it, watching it roll off into the tunnel ahead. Izak landed beside me and pointed again. We were almost there.

Penn Station was only a quarter mile further up, and we reached it without incident. I leaped smoothly from the tracks to the raised platform, careful not to be noticed by the people waiting for their rides. Izak pulled himself up beside me. If anyone noticed him, I doubted they cared.

"Trish said they were up in the concourse," I said. "I'll…" I stopped talking and focused. I could See a Divine nearby. Obi. "Wait here," I said to Izak.

He shook his head, but the look I gave him in return settled it. I glamoured myself as a businessman and walked briskly to the other end of the platform. Obi was here, and he was in the tunnels. It wasn't a good sign.

Once I reached the opposite end, I floated back down onto the tracks and followed my nose through the darkness. I could smell the former Marine now, somewhere in the tunnels ahead. He wasn't alone.

"How did you know?" the voice asked. It was deep and

masculine.

“Yeah, Sarge,” agreed another. “It’s not like we’re in a random tunnel in the New York City subway or somethin’.”

I followed the source of the voices, off the tracks and through another access tunnel, then down a secondary ladder and back into the sewer. Obi and the two patrolmen were just around the corner. Between my Divine Sight and Ulnyx’s sense of smell, I had a good idea of the scene. My heart dropped a little. He was kneeling over a dead body - a child’s body.

“Just a gut feeling,” Obi said.

Obi had been my first real ally, and despite our estrangement he was the one person I still had complete faith in. After the events at the Statue, he had decided to fight for mankind by getting back into uniform – this time as a police detective. We had gotten into a big fight about his role as one of mine, his pledge to help me keep the balance, and my need to take both sides. He wanted to help people, do good for them, balance be damned. I had been angry, still reeling from Rebecca and Josette, and had said a lot of things I shouldn’t have.

We continued to collide on occasion, when he would find his way into my world in pursuit of a vampire or other lesser demon. I had helped him out a couple of times, and he had returned the favor, but it was purely professional. I had dropped my anger a long time ago when the rest of my feelings had faded. This one was going to be professional too.

“Do me a favor guys,” Obi said. “Head up to the concourse and radio in, get the coroner down here. Also, get Yenys on the line and have her team come work the forensics.”

“Yes sir,” one of them replied. I ducked into darkness when their flashlight beams turned, then watched them exit out of the tunnel.

“Landon,” Obi said. “What brings you down here?”

I stepped out of the shadows and around the corner. My eyes fell right onto the body. It was Kelsie. I felt the anger start to build, and then fade. I looked up at Obi.

He was a plainclothes detective, so he was wearing a pair of navy slacks and a navy blazer over a simple white button down. His pumped up form was trying to press its way out of the suit, and he looked younger than the last time I had seen him. He turned his flashlight, bathing me in the glow.

“You knew her?” he asked.

I nodded. “Kelsie Peterson,” I said. “She lives… used to live with Sarah. She asked me to come and find her.”

He looked back down at the body. “Well,” he said sadly. “You found her.”

“This wasn’t my fault,” I said. I knew what he was getting at. “Nobody could have known that I know her.”

“She’s been drained, man,” he said. He reached down and turned her head so I could see the bite mark. “Vampire.”

“That doesn’t mean it had to do with me. She’s a vagrant. That makes her a prime target.”

He shrugged. “Either way, she’s dead. The question is, why would a vampire go after an Awake girl, and how did he grab her without being noticed?”

He was right. The numbers didn’t add up. “I don’t like the sound of that,” I said. “How did you know she was down here?”

“Her mother reported her missing,” he replied. “She was taken from the Penn Station concourse and nobody saw anything. Where else would I look?”

“It’s the same as the others?” I asked. The news reports I had been following wouldn’t have mentioned vampire feeding as the cause of death. According to Obi, mortals couldn’t see the bite marks, and they didn’t seem to think anything was awry with the tremendous loss of blood.

He got to his feet and walked over. “Yeah, six other girls killed by a vampire. It’s the same em-oh, different location. I’ve been keeping an eye on Freenet. There’s no chatter about this at all. Usually, if a vamp is going around draining kids, they’re selling the blood for a nice profit.”

“So whoever the killer is, he’s likely just your run of the mill psychotic demon.”

“Right,” Obi said. “I’ve got no leads, man. Not a single fiber to give me even the smallest clue about the perp.”

I looked down at Kelsie again. She was too young for this. “I’m on the job,” I said.

“You should have been on the job two weeks ago,” Obi muttered.

I didn’t respond to the dig. “I’ll have to go and tell her mother,” I said. “I’ll have her meet you at the morgue. We should work together on this one.”

Obi thought about it for a minute. “Alright, man,” he agreed.

“You carrying a cell these days?”

I had tried not to, but it did have its uses, even for the Divine. I took it out of my coat pocket. Obi snatched it and began keying in his contact info. I was watching his fingers slide across the keys when I caught my first scent of the demons headed towards us.

“We’ve got incoming,” I said to Obi.

He handed me back the phone, and then reached down and drew the gun from his belt. He was probably the only guy on the force who carried a Desert Eagle.

“I’ve got silver,” he replied.

I turned and looked down the tunnel towards the smell - nightstalkers, a lot of them. “Eighteen,” I said. “Nightstalkers.”

Obi groaned. “Eighteen?” he asked. “I’ve never heard of such a large group.”

I hadn’t either, and I didn’t like it. Nightstalkers hunted in groups, but they also kept their packs small so they could survive without attracting too much attention. Four to six was average. Eight to ten was a larger family. Eighteen was unheard of.

They sounded like a subway train, headed towards us at a full run. I could see them through the darkness as they entered our tunnel, a mass of pale flesh in ragged, stolen clothes flowing like a corroded river. A booming echo followed, and the lead demon fell forward to be stomped by the group behind it. Three more shots, and three more demons collapsed.

I took a deep breath and reached for Ulnyx’s power, weaving it into my own and feeling myself go through the change. I growled deeply and dashed forward, my powerful limbs carrying me to the nightstalkers in ten strides. I ripped into them with razor claws, scattering the group at the same time I decapitated the unlucky one who didn’t move away in time. They regrouped quickly, the whole mass of demons leaping on top of me, pulling me down. I could feel their teeth biting into my flesh, and their hands ripping at me. I heard more gunfire and felt a few of the nightstalkers fall away, but the silver wouldn’t hold them long.

“Stay back,” I shouted to Obi, my voice like gravel in the Great Were’s natural form. My body was being ravaged, but I was so accustomed to the defilement that I hardly felt it. I let the weight of the nightstalkers ground me while I changed back to my human form. I always focused more effectively without the demon’s power muddying the waters.

I took a deep, calm breath and focused, pressing my hand down on the cold stone floor of the tunnel. It began to vibrate, gently at first, but it became a violent earthquake in no time, shaking the ground below the demons and me. The ride didn't have much effect on their attack, but that wasn't why I had created the shockwaves.

Instead, I focused on the kinetic energy they were producing, pulling it into me, holding it around myself like an invisible singularity. I pulled it tighter and tighter, and as I felt the first hand grab my vulnerable neck, I released it. The energy crashed into the nightstalkers, throwing them away from me, slamming them into the sides of the tunnel or in both directions down the tube.

I rose to my feet as my body knitted itself back together and then ran towards three that had been thrown down the tunnel. They were stunned, and it made it easy to wrap my arms around their necks and rip off their heads.

Once that was done, I turned back around to check on Obi. He had pulled a blessed knife from somewhere on his body and was making quick work of the two nightstalkers that had been thrown his way. Divide and conquer, except the ones that had eaten the walls were recovering. I focused on my legs and threw myself forward, covering thirty feet in one powerful leap, landing just short of the former Marine.

"There's no point in sticking around to finish them," I said. "They won't follow us out of the tunnels."

"Back this way," Obi said. "I have to make sure my guys don't come back down here."

I raced over to where Kelsie's body was lying and gently scooped it up into my arms. She had been such a pretty little girl. I wasn't eager to share the news with Trish or Sarah. I looked back at the nightstalkers. They had regrouped, but they weren't giving chase. They just stood there watching us leave.

"Something's wrong," I said, motioning back towards them with my head. "Why are they giving up?"

I hadn't been paying attention. I turned my head back and saw Izak standing right in front of us, his eyes trained on Kelsie, his expression pure rage. He looked up at me, and I could see the fires of his anger dancing in his eyes. I was taken by the threat of his unspoken power, sizzling in the air around him.

Obi had his gun on the demon in a blink, only to have it ripped away by an unseen force. Izak turned it towards him, cocking the

trigger with an invisible hand.

“Izak,” I shouted. “No.”

The demon looked at me, and the gun clattered on the stone. Obi bent down and picked it up, keeping his eyes trained on the fiend.

“Why don’t you ever warn me about the company you keep?” Obi cried.

I didn’t pay him any mind. I felt a desperate pressure on my soul.

“*Sarah* ,” I said. Something was definitely wrong.

“*Landon, help me.* ” She was scared and in pain. A moment later she was gone.

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“Sarah,” I shouted. The anger was real. I could feel the heat of it rising from my chest. I could see it echoed in Izak’s expression. “Goddamn it,” I yelled as loud as I could, the epithet echoing off the walls. I focused on the rock above us, pulling at the stone in desperation. I needed to get to the surface, to get back to Sarah. The earth crumbled beneath my will, dropping to the floor in huge clumps.

“Landon,” Obi said, grabbing me and throwing me to the ground. It broke my focus. “You’re going to kill us all, man. Tell me what the hell is going on and I’ll help you.”

“Sarah,“ I said again. “Something’s happened. I need to get to her.”

“Come on,” he said, grabbing my arm and pulling me up. He led me out of the tunnel, back to the subway platform and up onto the concourse. His patrolmen were there, and he ordered them to keep the civilians out of the tunnel, that a collapse had ruined the crime scene. They looked at me, but all they saw was a homeless man carrying a duffel.

His car was parked right outside the 34th Street entrance. We jumped in and he hit the gas, his siren blaring a path in the otherwise unforgiving crush of traffic. I directed him through the city streets, the car careening in a controlled wildness as he raced along.

I jumped out of the car before Obi could slam it to a stop, had the manhole cover thrown aside, and was underground before he got out of the door. I could sense him following behind, but I didn't care. I had promised to protect Sarah, and now something had happened and I wasn't there. I focused, powering my legs, propelling myself forward. I left Izak and Obi way behind.

Eight minutes. That's how long it had taken me to get from Penn to Sarah's shanty town. It was eight minutes too late. The tents, tarps, cardboard, and plastic had been shredded and thrown around the cavernous room as though a tornado had somehow managed to form below the surface. Cookware, electronics, clothing; all of the Awake resident's worldly possessions lay scattered on the cement. The vagrants themselves hadn't fared much better. The bodies that hadn't been taken were tossed around like discarded old dolls, fresh blood still pooling around them, leaking from gaping wounds and missing appendages.

In the center of the carnage was Sarah's tent. It was the only thing still standing, pristine and innocent, as if it were immune to the reality of the world outside of it. The flap of the tent was drawn closed, and I didn't sense anything inside. Whatever had done this, it was gone.

"Sarah," I shouted. I knew it was useless, but I did it anyway. If she were okay, she would have kept the connection. I looked at the tent with apprehension. I had to know, but I didn't want to.

Pounding feet alerted me that Obi and Izak had finally caught up. They came to a quick stop behind me, Izak falling to his knees and doubling over with his hands over his face.

"Oh my god," Obi said, his breath catching.

"If it was, I'm going to kill Him," I said. So many feelings bubbling up, strange sensations that I had lost the understanding for. It was violent, calm, and cold. The tent. I started walking towards it. Obi scrambled to catch up, leaving Izak on the ground in despair.

The smell of death inside the tent was unmistakable, and it grew stronger as I approached. One body, a woman. There was another

smell too, Sarah's perfume. She had started wearing it a few months ago in an effort to get the attention of a boy in school. Her efforts had gone unrewarded, victim to another immature male that could admire her physical endowments, but couldn't overlook her physical shortcomings.

I stopped at the flap of the tent and glanced over at Obi. My face must have been betraying my feelings.

"I can look for you," he said. Despite our disagreements, he was still there when I needed him.

"No," I said. "Stay out here."

I took a deep breath and focused, pushing the nylon aside without touching it. The inside of the tent was dark, but I could see it clearly in black and white. My eyes traced along the floor, hesitant to make contact with the body that I knew was there. When they did, I breathed out heavily.

It was Trish.

I only had a second to feel the relief. My Sight exploded with heat and pressure, and the back corner lit up in a circle of flame. A Hell rift. I didn't have time to react before I was thrown backward out of the tent by an unseen force. I slammed to the ground twenty feet away, sliding along the blood-slicked floor.

I saw Obi turn to watch my flight, and then he dove towards the side of the tent just in time to avoid the attention of the demon that burst out of it. It was a monster I had never seen before, a mass of liquid darkness that undulated and flowed like oil around a black, skeletal face. The undulations molded and changed as it moved, becoming a foot, an arm, a claw, pushing off the floor at an impossible speed, propelling it towards me.

I focused, making myself stronger, spun my body and launched myself off the floor towards the creature, the force of the maneuver pressing the cement down into the earth. I hurtled towards the demon like a bullet, holding out my hand to grab onto the face. Its body changed in response, moving aside, the head disappearing behind the liquid flow. It slammed me with a monstrous fist as I barreled by, changing my direction and sending me crunching into the wall. Pain blossomed through dozens of broken bones, and I sucked in a weak breath. I focused again, knitting myself back together with as much speed as I was able.

The demon was flowing towards me, closing the distance in no time. I rolled away just in time to avoid a blade that formed in its

chest and stabbed out at me. Its face surfaced from the mass and leered, enjoying my mad scramble.

Gunshots echoed through the room, passing harmlessly through the demon to put deep chips in the wall behind us. The creature turned its head to look at Obi, then dismissed him. It rounded on me and lashed out with multiple new appendages. I avoided the blade, but a clawed hand scraped across my chest, ripping open my skin. I grunted in pain and backed away from the demon.

I heard a soft rustle, and then Izak was between the demon and me, a sword in his hand, lit up in hellfire. He had shed the heavy coats, revealing a perfectly chiseled upper body coated in demonic runes. The wraith stabbed out at him with multiple blades, but the fiend was faster than I had realized. He circled around the blades, bringing his sword down on one of the appendages. The hellfire burned right through it, and the dismembered end vanished in a haze of black smoke.

The monster recoiled, and then expanded and rose up, liquid legs stretching to allow it to tower over us. Its face rose to the surface and howled, sharp edges sprouting along its entire length. Izak stabbed his sword into the cement and dropped into a prayer squat, putting his hands together. He threw them wide as the demon collapsed onto us, the air above us exploding in flame. The creature shrieked and fell back, the edges of it singed and smoking.

Izak looked back at me with death in his eyes and pointed over at Sarah's tent. I nodded, focusing my will on the nylon structure and hurling it at the black mass. The demon was recovering, and a pointed limb launched towards Izak like a harpoon. The fiend saw it coming and smacked it away with his sword. A moment later the tent slammed into the hellspawn, covering it in nylon, wrapping it up like a net. Izak looked at me.

"Do it," I said.

He put his hands together again, then spread them out and forward toward the tent. The demon was struggling below it, and tendrils of black were beginning to snake out from underneath. It was too late. The hellfire lit up the nylon in an instant, giving the creature little time to scream before enveloping it as well.

Izak walked over to the smoldering pile of ash that was left behind, and then knelt down and spat on it. I stood there, stunned. I knew so little about the demon that had raised Sarah. I had always imagined he was a minor fiend, a standard underling to a much

more powerful archfiend. I should have known better; Josette's brother hadn't cut out his tongue for nothing. Still, the display of power had been shocking. Reyzl had exhibited only a fraction of the control over hellfire that Izak had, and he had done his fair share of damage to me with it.

After being burned by the stuff, I had learned as much about it as I could. It was pulled into the mortal world directly from the fires of Hell, not completely unlike the way angels were able to conjure their swords. It was difficult to create, difficult to control, and extremely powerful; not something that could be mastered by any old hellspawn. I could heal from it, but not quickly, and not without staying completely motionless and focusing on the affected area. Generating the holy water had been a one-off, a gift from Josette. I had never been able to do it again.

"What the heck was that thing?" Obi asked. He had been the odd man out in the dance, but now he rushed over to stand with me.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never seen anything like it."

His face darkened and he looked over to where the tent used to be. "Sarah?"

I shook my head. "She wasn't in there."

Izak had gotten back to his feet, and he walked over to where we were standing. His eyes still blazed red, and his bare chest was coated in a sheen of sweat. As soon as he reached us, he held out his arm, offering me his sword.

"Keep it," I said. "Gervais?"

The demon looked around the room, taking in the destruction. He shrugged.

Someone had taken Sarah, and not only that had left a surprise for whoever returned to find her gone. Josette's brother had every motive in the world to re-abduct his daughter, and to spring something nasty on his former minion. He also would have known the fiend's power, and what type of creature he would have to summon to be a match for him.

"Landon?" Obi reached out and put his hand on my shoulder.

My hand snapped up and I pulled it away, the force causing the former Marine to take a few steps back. My mind echoed with anger and rage, so unfamiliar and yet coming on so strong. I wanted to hurt, to kill. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

“Hey, man,” Obi said. “I’m sorry.”

I opened my eyes and looked at him. It was like seeing him for the first time in years. He didn’t look a day older than he had when I had pushed some of my power into him, giving him some of the strength of the Divine. He had aged though, I could see it in his eyes.

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry. This isn’t your fault. I appreciate you getting involved like this, but I think you may be in over your head.”

He replied with a huge smile. “Man, when am I not in over my head? At least when you’re concerned. We might not always see eye to eye, but that’s not just a human quality, that’s a life quality. It doesn’t mean I’m not with you when the crap hits the fan.”

“I appreciate that, but I have a feeling the crap hasn’t even hit the fan yet,” I said. “If Gervais found Sarah and made his move to reclaim her, he has to have plans for her. Archfiends are always scheming, but when they put the wheels in motion… that isn’t good for anybody.”

“I’m with you on that one. Look, you have my cell right?” I nodded. “I’ve got to call this in, get these bodies identified. People might have thought they were crazy, but they still had families, and maybe somebody has missed them.”

“What are you going to tell them?” I asked.

He looked around, his face blanching at the scene. “Gas leak, explosion, whatever I tell them is what they’ll believe. The mojo is funny that way. The good news, if you can call it that, is a bunch of vagrants die like this, we’ll identify the bodies, and we’ll contact next of kin, but that’ll probably be the end of it. The media isn’t interested in stuff like this, so it should be easy enough to make it go away.”

“Maybe for them,” I replied. Sarah was gone. I needed to get her back. “There’s a USB drive at my place at the Belmont. It’s got a lot of transaction data on it, money in and out. I think the numbers make a pattern, and the pattern makes a message. If you want to help me, look at the data and see what you can find. Just wedge the door again when you leave.”

Obi pursed his lips, considering my request. I knew he would do it. Like he had said, when times got rough he was nothing if not loyal. “Got it,” he said. “What are you going to do?”

I looked over at Izak. “I’ve got to get Sarah back before Gervais

can do whatever it is he aims to do with her. My fiend and I are going to take a trip to the City of Light."

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I didn't waste any time getting topside, running back through the tunnels and up through the manhole, onto the street next to Obi's squad car. Izak was following behind me, a little bit further back because he had stopped to grab his shirt and coats. As soon as I reached the surface I pulled the smartphone from my pocket and swiped over to my contact list. I scrolled down to Rachel's name and hit the call icon.

It rang six times before her answering service picked up. "Rachel," I said, after the beep, "can you arrange two tickets from JFK to Paris, France for me, and call me back with the flight number?" I hung up.

Izak pulled himself to the surface, one hand still gripping the sword. He had only put one of his grimy down jackets back on, and had lost the snow cap. He was going to have to do better than that.

"Izak," I said. "Homeless time is over. I can't take you on an airplane like that." I could have glamoured him to the mortals, but it was going to be tricky enough to get through the airport without having to worry about that detail. Not when the demon could take

care of it himself.

Izak grinned at me. His eyes danced with fire, and his appearance shifted like sand until the person standing in front of me no longer resembled the meek vagrant the fiend had been hiding behind. Instead, I was confronted with a middle-aged, wealthy playboy, with slicked back salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed mustache and beard. He was dressed in a fine Italian suit under a long wool trench, which he used to hide his blade.

"Better," I said, focusing and changing my own dress to better match the fiend's. It was like a bizarro Rain Man. I pointed to Obi's car. "Let's go."

I had just slid in behind the wheel when Obi climbed up out of the sewer. When he saw Izak sitting shotgun, his face fell.

"Come on, man," he cried, staring at us.

"It'll be at JFK," I shouted. "Tell them it was stolen."

He shook his head. "It is stolen," he shouted back. "Have you ever even driven before?"

"I'll be careful," I replied, swinging the shifter to drive and pulling away a little bit roughly. Growing up in the city, I hadn't had much need to drive, but I had played games at the local bowling alley. How different could it be?

I watched Obi in the rearview mirror as he pulled out his portable radio and called for backup. I knew he wouldn't mention his missing car until later.

"How could Gervais have found her?" I asked Izak while we drove. He shook his head in reply.

She had been safe because she believed she was safe. She had insisted she would be able to sense her father coming from miles away, and would be able to either hide or summon me way before he could ever snatch her. I had believed her, I had no reason not to; not after the other things I had seen her do. But something had changed. There was a vampire running around killing children, a vampire who had taken an Awake child, and they had never known he was there. A vampire that didn't give off a Divine signature. I knew the trick, but it couldn't be done without having access to both angel and demon sources of power. Or could it?

What if the vampire was no vampire at all? It wouldn't be hard for a demon like Gervais to make it look like a vamp had done the dirty work. Or, he could have Commanded it. I slammed my fist on

the steering wheel of the car in frustration, accidentally blaring the horn. I waved off the driver in front of me when he flipped me the bird.

The traffic was heavy through the midtown tunnel, and never really opened up as we headed along the Long Island Expressway. I had the urge to hit the sirens and lights more than once, but I didn't want to draw extra attention to the borrowed car. Instead, I looked up at the overcast sky, jealous of the angels one more time for their ability to get from place to place without having to deal with such pedestrian things as traffic. Even the demons had me beat there, with their ability to create and share transport rifts to locations around the world. They hoarded the locations of the rifts like diamonds, and no amount of negotiation or torture had gotten me any closer to mapping them. There was one under the Statue, but it was useless without knowing a connecting address, and Charis had destroyed the one on her end sometime after I had met her.

So I was left on the ground, slogging along like a mortal. Dante had said I couldn't fly, but I wasn't so sure. The problem was that it would draw an exponential sum of energy, and I couldn't be assured that the flux wouldn't have catastrophic consequences. Not to mention, I would likely burn out and drop from the sky in a coma, with no assurances that I would ever wake up. It was sobering to think about the chaos I could potentially create if I chose to, albeit at my own expense.

We had crossed the Grand Central and were doing twenty on the Van Wyck when my cell rang. I pulled it out of my pocket without my hands and air-tapped the pickup icon.

"Rachel," I said. "What's the flight?"

She sighed loudly on the other end of the phone. "I don't know why I do these things for you, Landon," she said.

"It's about Sarah," I said. I had never told her who or what Sarah was, only that she was important to me. That was all she needed to hear.

"Air France 7760," she said. "It leaves in four hours. Are you going to make it?"

Even at this pace, we would be at the airport in less than an hour. "We'll make it."

There was a moment of silence as Rachel waited for me to elaborate. When I didn't, she spoke again. "Well, I hope everything works out," she said. "I'm not going to get in trouble over this, am

I?”

“If everything works out, you’ll be in better standing,” I replied. I couldn’t imagine Heaven not applauding her for helping me take out another archfiend.

“Okay then. Good luck.” The phone clicked as she hung up.

“Thank you,” I said, a little too late.

I left the car stopped in the center of an aisle in the long term parking garage, and Izak and I made our way to Terminal One. It was going to be a little suspicious for the two of us to be taking an international flight without any luggage, so I created a small fire under the wheels of a parked taxi and made off with a couple of suitcases while the mortals around us were distracted by it. Izak gave me a toothy grin in response to the maneuver, and we headed to the desk better equipped to travel.

“Can I help you sirs?” Monique asked. She was a perky older woman who looked like she was overmatched by most of the luggage that she had to toss onto the belt behind her. Her name badge was pinned neatly to her breast.

“Yes,” I said. “I believe my secretary called in a reservation for my associate and me on Flight 7760 to Paris. The name is Joshua Meyer.” Rachel had given me the moniker the first time I had left the country.

Her fingers clacked along her keyboard. “Ah yes, here we are. Two first class tickets, Mr. Meyer and Mr. Smith. I’ll just need to see each of you gentleman’s passports, and then I can take your luggage and you can head off to gate D7.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a plain piece of printer paper, which I tore in half and handed to Monique. She never saw me tear it, she only saw two passports open to the picture. She took each and ran them under the scanner, verifying the identities. Getting into that database had been an awful month of social engineering and brute force hacking, but I had a nice supply of fake passport information to make use of as a reward.

“We’re all set,” Monique said, handing me back the paper and struggling to move the luggage onto the belt.

“They should have someone do that for you,” I said.

“It’s no problem,” she replied, her breathing heavy. “It keeps me in shape. You two gentlemen have a great flight.”

“We will,” I said.

Airport security for mortals was a general nightmare, with long

lines, crying children, juggling bags and coats and shoes and being exposed to questionable levels of radiation; not to mention the full body scanners. I hadn't flown much while I was mortal. I had flown a lot as a Divine. Getting past the TSA was as simple as walking right by, but that didn't mean that the airport was without its complications. There would be other Divine here, watching out for incoming mortal agents, keeping tabs on the general populace, and just waiting to be able to report that they saw me passing through. If I were lucky, they would leave me to my business and spy from the shadows.

I knew having Izak along was going to make things more complicated. No sooner had we walked unheeded past the metal detectors and backscatter machines than I sensed a pair of angels among the crowds waiting at the end of the terminal. They wouldn't have been able to recognize me from that distance, but they did notice Izak, and were moving towards us before we could take a dozen steps.

"Just let me handle this," I said to Izak. He held his left hand out and waved me forward in reply, and then stopped walking alongside me.

The angels were still out of view when I got my first smell of them. I knew one of them, and I knew he was no threat. Thomas. I stopped walking and motioned Izak to join me to wait for their approach.

The other angel was unfamiliar, a younger female with short spiked golden hair and a seraph runed ring through her nose. They both looked like they were better equipped for a stage show at Lollapalooza than an airport. When Thomas' companion saw Izak she reached back under her long leather coat to grab her sword. Thomas placed his hand gently on her forearm to stop her, and then looked at me and smiled.

"Greetings, fellow," he said, clapping me on the shoulder as soon as he was close enough to reach me.

"Careful, Thomas," I said. "The balance is even. You can get in a lot of trouble for fraternizing."

He laughed. "I've been in plenty of trouble since I met you," he replied. "Although the powers that be have been pleased with the results of our arrangement. You kept your word to restore the balance, and now we can at least breathe a little easier while we figure out how to get you out of the picture."

I appreciated the young angel's candidness. I had no doubt that Heaven was working non-stop to figure out how to get me someplace where they could put me out of commission. The problem for the good guys was that they had to do it within their moral code. When you couldn't resort to trickery and lies, it made for a tough assignment.

"Leave me to the demons," I said. "That's your best chance."

He sighed. "Except if we focus too much on good works and killing demons, you come around and set us back again."

"You heard about Silas?" I asked.

He nodded. "I've prayed to stay above getting angry for the things you do. Sometimes you don't make it easy."

I wasn't going to apologize. I had my reasons. I glanced over at the other angel. She was deferential to her elder, but it was clear she didn't approve of the conversation.

"Who's your new partner?" I asked.

"Initiate Melody. We thought airport duty would help her break in slowly. I didn't imagine we'd be running into you, although it was your companion who piqued my interest." Thomas looked over at Izak now, trying to gauge the demon's importance.

"Trust me when I tell you that you'll need a lot more backup to handle this one," I said. "In any case, he's helping me out with a complication that I need to clear up."

"Does the fiend speak for himself?" Melody asked, opening her mouth at last. Her name befitted her voice, a sweet tone with proper British inflection.

"Melody," Thomas said. "Mind yourself."

Her nostrils flared, her face reddening. "We have explicit orders not to let any demons out of the airport. Nobody said 'except if they're accompanied by the bleedin' diuscrucis.'"

"Melody," Thomas said softly. "Our orders did not need to specify what we should do if Landon came through. If you want to survive, you *will* mind yourself."

I don't know if it was youthful exuberance, loyal zealotry, or plain stupidity that led Melody to pull her sword and try to stab Izak with it. The whole motion happened in the smallest fraction of a second, an impressive move for such a green seraph.

She needn't have bothered. The tip of the blade had only begun to emerge from the front of her coat when Izak stepped nonchalantly to the side, reaching down and putting his hand on

the seraph's arm as the sword whistled through the unoccupied space. Her hand spasmed open at the touch and the blade clattered to the ground. Melody shifted her eyes and looked at Izak in fear, the rest of her body paralyzed.

"Izak," I said in warning. The demon just stood there with a light grip on her wrist. All he would have to do is run a fingernail through her flesh and his poison could begin to seep in. It would serve her right for being so impetuous, but it would also force Thomas to act.

"Melody," Thomas said, his displeasure obvious. "You have been instructed in the basis of our laws. This type of rash violence is forbidden, and giving in to such impulses could lead you down a very dark path that you wouldn't wish to travel. Furthermore, you would serve yourself and our Lord well to heed my warnings, and take advantage of my experience. Look at the back of the fiend's hand."

Melody's eyes shifted down, her pupils dilating when she saw the dark etchings of the runes beginning from the back of Izak's hands. No minor fiend would ever have knowledge of such things. It was a testament to the demon's power.

"You can let her go now," I said.

Izak bore his eyes into Melody's for a few seconds, sending a warning about further aggression, and then released her wrist. Able to move again, the seraph took a few steps back and put her hand to her face to cover her tears.

"We have a plane to catch," I said to Thomas, pulling Melody's blade up to my hand and glamouring it as a guitar case. "It was good to see you again."

I started walking around the angels, but when I looked at Melody I felt a sudden, unbidden twinge of guilt. I stood in front of her until she looked up at me.

"Your time will come Initiate," I said, the words familiar on my tongue but foreign in my mind. "Remember that your greatest strength comes not from your skill, but from your faith."

Somehow, the words brought her comfort, but they completely sapped me of mine.

"*Josette* ," I said, calling out to her in my soul. I could feel her spirit, her warmth, but it was gone as quickly as it had arrived. I stepped around Melody and continued towards the terminal, my entire being weighed down by the experience.

When we got to the gate, I found a couple of empty seats in the corner by the window and led Izak over to them to wait. The demon eschewed the chairs for the floor in front of the window, taking off his suit coat, bunching it in a ball, and using it as a pillow to rest his head against. He glanced over at me one last time, and then closed his eyes and went to sleep.

The action confirmed everything I already suspected about our alliance. Demons didn't need to sleep any more than I did, so the move was an obvious dismissal. Izak was interested in Sarah, nothing more. The feeling was mutual.

I closed my eyes and took a couple of deep breaths, feeling the river of power feeding into my soul. I tracked it back to its source, my Source, and watched as the mortal world began to dematerialize around me. In moments it was a frozen haze, and then it was gone. I was sitting in the airport again, but my soul was firmly planted in Purgatory.

A wave of my hand, and the glass of the terminal vanished. I stood and ran towards it, kicking off at the last instant and launching into the air. I couldn't fly in the mortal world, but things were different here.

There was no real need to fly at all, I could have brought myself to my destination with nothing more than a thought, but I had found that maintaining a relative amount of consistency between the worlds was useful for normalizing the feedback of the experience to my physical mind. In the early days after Rebecca had vanished I had visited Purgatory often, exploring my newfound power and testing my limits. I had made and remade the world so many times, and when I had returned to my body I had found my power reduced. Like everything else, it was a balance.

I found Dante outside of his eleventh-century manse, tending to his garden. He was kneeling over a smaller outcropping of roses, a simple white linen robe resting over his shoulders, with lines of dirt stains slicking down his back where he would wipe his hands. His balding head was shiny under the sun, and a layer of perspiration trickled down through the wafts of hair that ringed his temple. He was picking delicately at the rose bushes, pruning with precision and adoration.

"Buongiorno Signore," I said, landing behind him without a sound.

"Ahh, buongiorno Landon," he replied, his voice relaxed. I had

never been able to sneak up on him, or surprise him. “It is quite a fine day for tending the garden, wouldn’t you say?”

“Gervais,” I said.

Dante dropped the shears and stood, his robe changing to a clean, rich red velvet as he turned. “The archfiend?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m on my way to Paris to kill him.”

I had never mentioned Sarah to Dante. While I had more trust for the Lord of Purgatory than I did for most, it didn’t extend deep enough for me to believe the poet wouldn’t have his own designs for a true diuscrucis. Sarah’s current life was mortal, and she deserved a chance to live as close to being one as she could.

“Why Gervais? Why now? Come, walk with me.” Dante put his hand on my shoulder and guided me away from the rose bushes, back up towards his home. A servant waited there, holding a tray with two glasses on it.

“I told you about the children being killed in New York,” I said.

“Yes, of course. A serial killer no doubt. You said you would let the mortal law enforcement deal with it.”

“A girl was killed by a vampire this morning. She and her mother were both Awake. They never sensed it coming. It turns out, the other children were killed the same way.”

I watched Dante’s eyes shift. He already knew about it. I locked my hand on his wrist as he grabbed for a glass of water.

“You already knew,” I said, my anger growing. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

One moment I was holding his wrist, the next I wasn’t. He slipped my grasp with no effort and picked up his water, taking a few swallows.

“Tell you what, signore?” he asked. “That a vampire was killing children? How is that so different to you from a mortal killing children? Such a thing has little meaning on the balance, and the angels will track the demon down sooner or later, if your Obi doesn’t first.”

He was right, but I hated hearing it. In the beginning I had taken a hard line on certain kinds of evil, and it had been easy to justify because the balance required it. Lately, I had been too committed to my quest for answers, and too ambivalent to make it a priority. Now Sarah was gone.

“We can’t wait for anyone else,” I said. “If the demons have figured out how to hide themselves, we need to stop them, right

now."

He turned and started walking down a cobblestone path towards a small pond. I followed next to him. "I agree, signore. So the question is, why do you think it is the Parisian archfiend? What would he have to gain by killing children in New York City?"

I wasn't about to tell Dante my real motives. "A test," I said.

He stopped and looked at me. "A test?"

"To see if I could sense him. If your goal was to get close to the diuscrucis undetected, wouldn't you test it nearby, with an increasing degree of difficulty?" Dante didn't look wholly convinced. "Besides, only an archfiend can rune and power a Hell rift, and send something truly nasty through it."

"Nasty?"

I described the creature to Dante, and the destruction that I claimed it had caused. I didn't mention Izak's role in its defeat, changing the outcome to make me look oh-so-clever. It didn't matter, it was the results that were important. In the meantime, Dante had walked to the pond and sat down along its stone banks, hiking up his robes and dipping his feet in the water.

"So you believe it was Gervais?" Dante asked. "It is possible, for only a powerful demon such as he could Command a wraith. Yet, I have two questions for you, signore. How do you know the archfiend returned to Paris, and have you considered that it was not Gervais, but the Demon Queen who is responsible?"

The questions caught me off-guard. I knew that Charis wasn't responsible, because she wasn't against me. How could she be, when she had me in the palm of her hand and let me go? But what if that had been a trick? A deception to point me in the direction she wanted me to go, so that I would be easier to manipulate? That was how demons liked to work after all, and there was no doubt that she had the ability to create such complex plots. But what could she want with Sarah, and how did she even know she existed?

"The archfiend is back in Paris," a smooth voice said from behind us. I turned to see Mr. Ross standing there, still wearing the same pinstripe suit and sunglasses that he had been sporting when we first met. "The kid is right to be concerned."

"What do you know?" I asked. I hated how he refused to use my name. I was always 'son', 'kid', or 'boy'. Dante pulled himself away from the water and stood next to me.

Mr. Ross reached into his pocket, pulling out a fine gold antique pocket watch and flipping it open. “There isn’t much time,” he said, reaching up to lower his sunglasses and look at me with his rich blue eyes. “Something big is going down, and you’re at the center of it, son.”

“Me?” No, this was about Sarah. Not me. Unless…

“A trap?” Dante asked.

Mr. Ross pushed his sunglasses back up his nose. His response was smug. “An archfiend picks a fight with you and takes off halfway around the world, hoping you’ll give chase… yeah, I’d say it’s a trap.”

Five years, and I felt like I hadn’t learned anything. It would be so easy to draw me in by taking Sarah. If Gervais knew where she was, he was sure to know about our connection, if only through observation.

“Do you know anything about demons being invisible to Divine Sight?” I asked.

Mr. Ross shrugged. “I know *you* can do it. Maybe you aren’t the only one?” He turned his attention to Dante. “Should I look into it?”

Dante nodded. “Yes, thank you, Signore Ross.”

He disappeared before Dante had finished speaking. I stood and stared at the spot where he had been, annoyed that he had left without telling me anything concrete about the demons’ plans. The fact that I knew I was walking into a trap would have to be enough.

“Well, signore,” Dante said, “I guess it is Gervais after all.”

“It seems that way,” I said. “See if you can find out anything more about what I may be getting myself into. I know Mr. Ross was thorough, but I want to be sure we cover all of our bases.”

Dante smirked at my sarcasm. “Without Mr. Ross, you would know nothing. At least you can prepare.”

“Spare me the platitudes and just do it,” I replied, and then I did my own disappearing act, riding the river of power back from Purgatory to my body in meatspace.

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We boarded the plane without incident, making our way to our seats near the front of first class. I took both Izak and Melody's 'guitars' and stowed them up in the overheads, forcing the other passengers to figure out how to get their own overabundant carry-ons squeezed into the limited space. Our stewardess, Farrah, stopped by to introduce herself, and to take our drink order so she could serve us as soon as possible after takeoff. I was going to politely send her away, but Izak grabbed my arm and pulled on my coat sleeve.

"You want a drink?" I asked him. The demon nodded. I didn't see the point - I had already tried to decompress with hard liquor. It was a fruitless endeavor. "My associate would like a..whiskey, neat," I said to Farrah. Izak grinned, approving of my choice.

Farrah smiled at him, successful in her effort to hide the oddness of the encounter. "Yes, sir," she said. "I'll be able to serve as soon as we've completed our take-off procedures." She moved on to the next passenger.

"Have you ever been in an airplane before?" I asked.

Izak shook his head. He waved his arm at the interior of the plane, then swept his hand back and forth in front of his chest. No such thing as airplanes, at least in the days before he was able to travel through rifts. Based on his scars, he knew how to use transport rifts. Why hadn't he suggested one for us?

"You know how to use rifts?"

His face grew more grim, but he nodded.

"Then why are we flying?" I asked.

He grinned again, then took his hands and clamped them together. Trap.

"Good call," I said. "How old are you anyway?"

He didn't respond, but a flash of flame cascaded through his opaque eyes. It caused me to question whether trapping myself in a metal tube six miles above the ground with him was a good idea. Could I be sure he wasn't still working for Gervais? I'd seen what he'd done to the wraith. We would never be friends, but for the moment I could trust him.

The jet taxied out to the runway and launched skyward without incident. I put my head back against the soft, supple leather of the first-class seat and shut my eyes. There was no sleep there, little relaxation, and no escape from the guilt that was hounding me. Whether or not this whole thing was a plot to lure me in, Sarah being taken was my fault. Maybe if I had met her for training on time, this whole thing could have been avoided.

My eyes were still closed when Farrah returned with Izak's drink. I didn't open them to watch the exchange, but something the demon had done caused the attendant to giggle like a schoolgirl. She returned a few minutes later, and I could hear her handing him another. Maybe I was the only Divine who wasn't affected by liquor.

I opened my eyes when the 'fasten seatbelt' light dinged off. I looked over to Izak, then jerked my head back. He was staring right at me, booze on his breath and his eyes glowing like smoldering embers. Before I could focus, his right arm lashed out and his hand wrapped around the back of my head. He held me steady, forcing my eyes to lock onto his. I found my focus, felt the pull of my power, but held up in taking action. I felt something else, a warmth that calmed me in an instant. My vision began to fade, the interior of the airliner vanishing into the black void, my self-being pulled into Izak's dark soul.

The scene that greeted me when my vision returned was unexpected. A table with a white tablecloth, two candles, two plates, two glasses. Behind it, a fireplace with a small flame flickering inside, its light dancing across the stone and wood walls surrounding the room. It reminded me of a ski lodge, only there were no windows, and no doors. I felt a momentary panic when I realized my perspective was off, and then when I discovered that while I was witness to the show, I wasn't driving.

"It worked." The excited voice was deep and a little bit rough, and it echoed around the room.

My vision shifted, turning to face the new presence in the room. I knew it was Izak before I saw him. He was different here, his face and body the same, but with a confidence and handsomeness that was hiding outside of his Source. He was wearing a sharp, solid black suit with a purple shirt and a black tie. His hair was cut short, and a thin beard traced his angled face.

"Izak," Josette said. I could feel her happiness wash through me as her face split into a smile. If my body were my own, I might have cried from the joy of hearing her voice again. The demon took care of that for me.

"I've missed you," he said, stepping forward and wrapping us up in a gentle hug, the tears running off his face and onto our shoulder.

"Come now Izak. Demons don't cry," she joked.

"Only for you," he replied. "I never thought I would see you again. Gervais told me you were dead, and then I found your soul mixed with the diuscrucis. I wasn't sure you would hear me calling you." He began to grow angry when he mentioned me.

Josette put her hand to Izak's chest. "I heard you, and I am here. "she said. "Be at peace. I gave my soul to Landon of my own free will. Some things transcend loyalty to our Lords."

Izak took a deep breath. I could see the affection in his gaze. "They do," he agreed. He reached up and put his hand over hers. "I'm sure you know. Gervais found Sarah. He tricked the dius... Landon, distracted us so he could take her."

"I'm so sorry, Josette," I said in our mind. If she could hear me, there was no indication.

"We're on a plane to Paris right now," Izak said. "I would have taken Landon through the Empire Gate, but I thought it was too risky."

“You did well,” she said. “Bring him through the sewers. Gervais will have his toys waiting there too, but he won’t be expecting both of you.”

Izak smiled, debonair and mysterious. I could picture him using that face on the stewardess, making her giggle. The smile faded.

“I hope he can handle Gervais on his own,” he said.

He took his hand away from hers, reached up and unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt to reveal a deep scar; the archfiend’s name in demonic runes.

“He branded you?” Josette asked in shock.

“I’m surprised you never guessed,” Izak said. “Without the brand, I would have killed him many years ago. To think that upstart got the better of me...” His gaze was distant, and the fireplace flared in response to his angry memory. “It hasn’t been for nothing. I didn’t believe in redemption before I met you.”

“And I believed I would die of despair before I met you,” Josette said. She moved her hand up to the demon’s face, pulling it down so she could kiss him on the cheek. “Please Izak, help Landon. He has a hard road ahead of him, and while his soul is strong, he cannot survive alone. If he is lost, Sarah will follow.”

Izak softened under her caress, returning her chaste kiss with puppy dog eyes. “You know I’ll give my life to protect Sarah. I will do what I can, but he has to deal with Gervais on his own.”

“Thank you,” Josette said.

“Of course. Will you stay a while?” Izak’s face lit up in hope.

“I cannot,” Josette said. “It isn’t fair to Landon to usurp his consciousness like this without his consent.”

Izak looked crushed, but he acquiesced. “Know that I love you, Josette,” he said. “You have brought me back from the depths of Hell, and for that I am eternally grateful.”

Josette’s emotions were a mixture of joy and sadness. They washed through me in a flood. “Know that I love you as well, and that I am with you, even if only in spirit.”

Izak kissed Josette on the cheek, and the room began to darken. I could feel myself being pulled away, taken from the demon’s Source and returned to my seat on the plane.

“*Know that I love you too, Landon* ,” Josette said, her voice a powerful song in my soul. “*You have honored my request to the best of your ability, and her abduction wasn’t your fault. We will get her back.* ”

“We?” I asked. She knew I was there with her. My heart thudded with excitement.

“I am with you, fellow,” she said. “I will always be with you.”

When my vision returned, it was clouded over by the tears that had streamed from my eyes. Izak was still staring at me, his black orbs also moist with emotion.

“Another drink, Mr. Smith?” Farrah asked. She was leaning into our aisle a little bit, observing our moment with absolute professionalism.

Izak removed his hand from my head, flashed her that debonair grin, and nodded his head. I watched her walk away out of the corner of my eye. She looked back four times.

“How did you do that?” I asked in a hoarse whisper. Josette’s soul, her power was part of me, and yet her voice had been more accessible to the demon. I was comforted by her parting words. Otherwise I would have been in despair at the outcome.

Izak sat up straight in his seat, still looking at me. He cocked his head, confused. He hadn’t expected me to come along for the ride. He reached down and picked up a crumpled napkin that was laying on the seat next to me, unfolding it to show me the precise runes burned into the center. I looked down and saw that he had positioned the drink napkins all around me.

He pointed at me, and then swept his hand horizontally and shook his head, looked only at my golden angel eye and smiled. It wasn’t the same cocky smile, but a softer, gentler grin. He reached out and touched the side of my face, caressing it. I had been there, I had heard his promise. Maybe we would be friends after all.

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Izak spent the remainder of the flight tossing back the booze, but as I had expected the stuff did nothing for his physical state. It had been an awkward and overly complicated conversation of words on one side and hand gestures on the other, but in the end I had come away with the understanding that the fiend had initially used the drinking as a ruse to create some kind of summoning ritual with the napkins, and afterwards had continued drinking because he found it pleasurable. At least it had provided a diversion from the macabre thoughts that would cross my mind whenever I tried to work out what Gervais intended to do with his daughter.

Even so, the time I didn't spend conversing with Izak was filled with an anxiety and dread that had nearly consumed me by the time the plane touched down at Paris Orly Airport. It had been so long since I had felt anything at all, and now every emotion was a knife in my soul, a reminder of why I had worked so hard to suppress my mortal shortcomings in the first place. I fought to keep my mind focused on the feeling of immersive warmth that Josette had brought to me. She was sure we would get to Sarah, and I held

onto that hope because my own was floundering.

It was a little after two on a windy, cold, rain-soaked morning when the plane began its final approach into Orly. Izak and I had agreed that stepping foot in the airport proper would be a bad idea, and so we unbuckled our belts, grabbed our carry-on, and started heading for the rear of the plane the moment the wheels touched the ground. We had made it back to coach, all eyes on the two morons who couldn't follow instructions, when Farrah rushed through the first-class curtain waving her arms.

"I'm sorry, sirs," she said, "but I'll need you to return to your seats until the plane has reached the terminal, and the fasten seatbelt light is turned off."

Izak turned to face her, and by her reaction I knew this time his smile was no smile at all. Her eyes grew wide in shock, and she fell backward in fear, tripping over an outstretched foot and tumbling to the ground.

"Seriously?" I asked the fiend. The rest of the passengers began to erupt in a silent panic, suddenly fearful of who or what was walking down the aisle of the plane. I knew that feeling, because I had experienced it once myself.

We picked up the pace, and when we reached the rear exit I focused on the locking mechanisms, spinning it open untouched and flinging it out into the onrushing air. The passengers started screaming, and I turned at the sound of someone approaching. A well-muscled guy in a suit was coming for us, a stun gun held out ahead of him. It figured we were on a marshaled flight.

I grabbed Izak and threw him from the plane, deked to the right to throw the marshal off-balance, and gave him a soft shove back into the plane before he could fall out. I winked at him, and then tossed myself backward, hanging in the air and slamming the door shut as the tail of the craft passed overhead, then slowing my momentum and putting myself down onto the tarmac. Izak was already back on his feet and headed towards me, his body regenerating from the major road rash I had given him. When he reached me, he punched me in the shoulder.

"Serves you right," I said. "We could have been a little bit more inconspicuous."

The demon shrugged.

I turned to scan the runway, looking for the nearest perimeter fence. I had only made it a quarter of the way around when my

Sight exploded in heat, and a moment later the airplane we had just been riding in began screeching and whining, and then burst into flames. I spun around to catch the tail-end of the action, a tremendous hand reaching down and crushing the fuselage right before the rest of the plane vanished beneath the ignition of the remaining fuel and the explosion of the engines.

When Mr. Ross had said something big, I hadn't imagined he was being literal. The demon that had just obliterated Air France 7760 was massive in scale. Easily thirty feet tall, it looked as though it had been born of the earth itself, its face unsculpted but for a pair of beady red eyes, its body an amalgam of stone and mud, with oversized arms and hands.

It looked up from the explosion, quickly finding me standing out in the open, its reaction confirming that it was there to crush me in those massive hands. I held up the blessed sword and dropped into a fighting stance, only to be forced to leap backward as a second giant fist pounded the earth where I had been standing.

The size of the first demon and the heat of the explosion had been effective at disrupting my senses, and I scrambled to stay ahead of the second monster's attacks even while the first headed my way. I caught a glimpse of Izak out of the corner of my eye, again crouched in concentration, pulling the hellfire through its conduit and launching it at the creature. The flames licked at the demon's skin, but it was unaffected, its hide too thick for it to be fazed.

Izak leaped out of the way of a tremendous earthen leg, and then rushed forward, stabbing his blade deep into the creature's calf. It didn't even notice, keeping its attention on me.

I heard the sirens of the incoming emergency response team as I focused, enhancing my strength and speed and using the power to keep away from the two demons while they mangled the earth and blacktop around me, trying to land the strike that would crush me into a pulp that I couldn't regenerate from. I tried a few quick stabs and cuts with my own blade, but it skipped off the hard carapace in a shower of sparks. Useless.

I focused and threw myself backward, putting a few seconds of distance between the monsters and me. Immediately they began to lumber towards me, lined up side by side, their footfalls shaking the ground at my feet. I could see the firetrucks and ambulances behind them, the mortals scrambling to find survivors in the wreckage that

I had indirectly caused. I shut down the feeling of guilt before I could fully recognize it, opting instead to reach for some of the twisted metal that had been tossed out onto the field. I yanked it towards me as hard as I could, bringing it high up and around the rear of the demons. They were almost on me now, and while I could evade them all night, I couldn't play this game forever.

I closed my eyes, the absence of the scene helping me to focus with greater precision and clarity. I could still See the demons with my senses, and I used my Sight to direct the sharp aluminum and steel, bringing it down from the heavens to pierce the creatures' small red eyes. The beasts didn't waver, their huge arms rising to make the killing blow. That was when I vanished.

The demons stopped with their arms still raised above their heads, the confusion obvious in their frozen position. I moved out of their path and caught sight of Izak sitting on the grass, an observer to the battle. When he saw me looking he gave a short wave, then pointed back at the demons.

Having lost their quarry, the two giants began hammering the ground with abandon, their huge jackhammer arms leaving the earth around them in total devastation. That wasn't going to work either. I dropped out of stealth mode and rushed forward, leaping up and latching on to one of the monster's necks.

They tracked my movements with precision, and I let go just in time to avoid a knockout punch that would have sent me back to New York. Instead, the demon's fist smashed into his partner, the tremendous force of the blow crunching into the earth and stone, the momentum separating the head from the body. The stricken monster crashed to the ground without a sound, crumbling into a pile of rock and mud as though it had never been animated at all.

The other demon didn't seem to notice, and it continued to hunt me, bringing its massive body to bear and moving with a renewed vigor. Izak had gotten to his feet now, and I saw him out of the corner of my eye, bent over and scratching something out in the dirt. He held up his hand palm out, asking me to wait. I rolled away from a heavy strike, and then danced around to the back of the beast. I could see Izak through the demon's legs as it tried to turn on me, and a moment later had begun waving me towards him.

I scrambled back between the demon's legs, running full speed towards the fiend. I caught sight of the runes below me when I passed them over and came to a stop. The demon tried to follow

and the runes Izak had made burst into flame, pulling in power from Hell itself and sending it up into the demon in an invisible stream. The monster disassembled at once, bursting forward in a flood of wet mud and stone, coating us in a layer of muck and pelting us with rock. Even before the shower had ceased, Izak grabbed me by the collar of my coat and pointed to three words he had scrawled in the ground.

Elemental. Witch. Close.

I looked up towards the terminal, nearly a mile from where we were standing. I focused my Sight and reached out, searching for a Divine signature. It was faint, but it was there. I could never have picked it up with the two elementals so close by, and the witch must have known it. She started moving away from us.

Witches and warlocks weren't straight Divine, but rather Turned who had in whatever manner gotten into the higher graces of a more powerful higher demon. On their own, they weren't much more of a threat then any other mortals who had made a deal with Hell, but once you factored in the imbued trinkets, baubles, and jewelry they were often given in exchange for whatever services had earned them the level up to begin with, they started to become a bit more of a hassle to deal with. My dealings with them had been fairly limited - it wasn't common for mortals to be able to ingratiate themselves that well with an archdemon, but judging from the fact that this one had created two earth elementals, she was important, and her master was powerful. It didn't take a genius to figure out who had sent her.

"We need to catch up to her," I said. There was a good chance she would be headed back to Gervais to announce our arrival. He might know we were coming, but I preferred to keep some element of surprise as to when.

We both took off towards the terminal at a run. I couldn't help but glance over at the emergency crews desperately fighting to find survivors in the crumpled up husk of the aircraft's fuselage. Whatever Gervais was planning, whatever was 'going down' to try to trap me, it had already gone too far.

Our pace was inhumanly fast, and we burst into the baggage loading area and through to a maintenance door in the airport proper before the witch had managed to get too far. I focused, changing our attire so that to the small crowd of people taking early morning flights we looked like French military, our swords

appearing as assault rifles strapped to our backs. Not that it mattered much, most of the travelers were either glued to the window, fascinated by the carnage outside, or sitting in a chair expelling their horror with tears.

I could See her more clearly now. She was still a fair distance ahead, but we were closing the gap in a hurry. She knew we were gaining, and I could hear her shouting from the end of the long corridor. I felt a flare in my soul, and a moment later a naga burst out at us from the men's room.

One of the First Fallen's failed humanoid creations, it was eight feet tall, with the head and torso of a human and the backend of a snake, four muscular, armored arms holding four wicked looking jagged swords, and an almost handsome dark face. It snapped its sharp, poisoned tail towards my chest, but I dropped my legs out and slid along the floor, feeling the swish of air as the appendage passed within centimeters of my face.

"Izak," I said. It was all I needed to say. The fiend drew his own blade and pounced, leaving me listening to the ring of steel while I raced ahead.

There was a much larger crowd gathered outside the terminal, denied entry by the police while they tried to figure out what was happening out on the runway, unable to comprehend the massive battle that had just taken place. I could still sense the witch, but she was moving away faster, much faster. I looked around until I saw one officer helping another back to their feet. She had taken his motorcycle.

The crowds parted mindlessly around me as I raced after her, in search of a means to keep the pace. When I reached the edge of the throng, I found plenty of police cars and motorcycles lined up in the roadway. I stopped and took a deep breath. I had driven a car once, and a real motorcycle not at all, but I knew which one was faster and more maneuverable. I had played 'Hang-On' at Coney Island when I was ten. How different could it be?

I mounted the bike and tried to ignore the overwhelming number of switches and levers on the console. I found the key and turned it, bringing the bike to life, and then twisted the throttle. The machine started bucking out from under me until I focused, holding it in place until I was ready for it to move. I took another moment to test the clutch a few times, but decided to just put it in high gear and cheat my way through. I held the bike until I was

sure I had enough wheel velocity, let go, and did a peel-out Evil Knievel would be proud of, taking off on my rocket.

The landscape was a blur around me, and I kept the rest of the focus that wasn't holding me on the bike holding my sense of the witch. I quickly found myself headed north towards Paris, following behind her but beginning to gain once again. As long as she was out of tricks, I would catch up well before we hit the city limits.

She wasn't out of tricks. I heard the screeching before I saw them; half a dozen small, bat-like demons with razor beaks and sharp claws. They swooped down on me en masse, buzzing my head and doing their best to knock me off the bike. I could focus on the witch and my stability, but it didn't leave me any mind-share to do anything non-physical about the creatures. Instead, I used one hand to reach behind my back and wrench the sword through my jacket and swing it out at them.

The first few slices were wild and ineffective, and my speed diminished as I put more of my energy into staying upright and gaining control of my attacks. The demons circled around me, swooping in to cut open my arms and legs with their claws, screeching in my ears, and trying to tip me off the bike. They almost did when I found myself only inches from an eighteen-wheeler and had to make an impossible left hook around the trailer before I slammed into it. The demons' amused cackling renewed my focus, and I pushed the sword backward and through one of the hell spawn, and then swung it in an arc that caught two more.

That still left three, and my quarry was getting away. I changed tactics, letting the sword fall to the roadway and putting my attention back on the chase. I revved the bike up to full throttle and slipped across to the other side of the road into the oncoming traffic. It worked in the movies, so why not now?

Traffic was limited so early in the morning, but the oncoming obstacles still proved to be effective at forcing the demons to either drop away from the bike or get splattered on a windshield. I wound my way around the cars, using their natural tendency to subconsciously avoid me to my benefit. Soon enough I was outpacing the demons, and I was almost close enough to the witch to get her in my physical sight.

I did get her in my sight as we pulled off of E50 onto Quai de la Rapee, the highway that ran into Paris along the Seine. As I had thought, she was on a police motorcycle of her own, her long brown

hair flailing out behind her as we raced along the river. She turned her head to look back at me, and I could see the fear and anger on her face. She reached down into a pouch at her side, and I knew I had to end the chase.

"Here goes nothing," I said, focusing my will, pulling at the power being fed through my soul, and leaping off the bike. I propelled myself forward as if I had been shot from a cannon, launching straight towards the witch, wrapping my arms around her as my velocity carried me past. Her bike fell out from under her and went skidding along the roadway, as did mine. A moment later I followed suit, turning myself over to protect her from the impact, wincing in pain when the cement ripped right through my clothes and dug deep into my skin. I tumbled along the ground, fighting to keep my body absorbing all of the impact, feeling bones shattering, ribs breaking. It would heal, but it still hurt.

We came to a stop a hundred yards ahead of the bikes. I heard the screaming brakes of cars behind us trying to avoid the abandoned motorcycles, coming to a stop and then slowly proceeding past as though such obstacles were ordinary. I held the witch tight while she struggled to break free of my grasp, even though every move from her petite frame was burning agony. Finally, I wrapped my hand around her throat.

"Stop squirming, or I'll pop your head like a grape," I growled.

She stopped struggling and instead started to laugh. "Ah, Landon," she said. "You're a fool."

I saw the glint of metal and watched her stab herself in the heart with a small blessed dagger. She turned to dust in my broken arms.

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I picked myself up, climbing slowly to my feet. My energy was sapped, and it had left me more tired than I remembered being in years. Throwing myself like that hadn't quite been flying, but it was close enough to wear me down. If the circumstances had been different, I might have been able to savor the moment, because I really needed a bed.

She had called me a fool, right before she killed herself. What kind of fool? For walking right into a trap? For wasting my energy chasing her down? For leaving Izak behind? I was certain I was a fool, because no matter how much I had tried to make myself not feel, to make myself immune, I was still part human. I could lie to myself and deny it, but in the end it didn't really make it hurt any less.

I looked around, trying to get my bearings. I could see the Arc De Triomphe lit up down the road, and even though my knowledge of Paris was limited, I knew the Arc was near the Louvre, and that meant there were bound to be hotels nearby. I spent a little energy to adjust my style to a more respectable pair of dark jeans and

tweed jacket, and then reached inside my pocket to check my cell.

The hardened device had fared well, its rubberized outer shell keeping it intact. I turned it on and opened up Google Maps, and then asked it for the closest hotel. It pointed me at the Mandarin Oriental, north past the Louvre and then hang a right on the Rue de Rivoli. I took a deep breath and started walking.

Paris was an old city, and I could feel currents of Divine power coursing along the streets like a weird radioactive mist of good and evil. I reached the end of the Place du Carrousel and turned right, my sight feasting on the impressiveness of the neoclassical architecture, my Sight blurred by the thrumming of ancient power. My head was aching, and my eyes were heavy, my soul begging me for a respite amidst the chaos. It was only a few minutes walk before I could make out the sign for the Mandarin, lit up in the night. I never made it.

I didn't sense the weres coming, completely missing them in between the cover of the mist and my fatigue. I smelled them too late, and they turned the corner in front of me a dozen strong, shifted into animal form and coming on fast. I reached around to my back for my sword before remembering I had dropped it on the highway, and then crouched in a martial fighting position. I could feel Ulnyx's power flowing through my soul. I prepared myself to use it.

The weres pulled up to a stop in front of me, teeth bared but keeping their distance. Behind them, a dark silhouette of a woman made itself known, stepping out of the shadows and framing herself under the streetlights. I couldn't make out her features, but I did pick up her scent, wafting over to me in the night air. It was familiar; a flowery, earthy smell that some part of me knew. I felt a stirring in my soul, and the world around me grew fuzzy. I dropped to one knee and closed my eyes, trying to shake the oncoming memory.

* * *

I see her from the corner of my eye. Lylyx. I can smell her fear, but also her desire. She's unsure if I can win this fight, and the trepidation is an aphrodisiac. I share in the excitement, my senses heightened, my heart pounding. She's unbelievable in her tight doeskin pants and vest, her cleavage heaving beneath it. Her skin is almost as silky as her raven

black hair, glistening under a layer of sweat, and it's enough to distract any man with a taste for perfection in flesh. It's worse for a were in the heat of battle.

The claws that rake across my cheek remind me that I'll only get the spoils if I'm the victor. I growl in anger, ignoring the burning pain and putting my attention back on my opponent. Tiberas, a hulking, scarred, soon to be dead werewolf, the current leader of the Mekong pack, and my brother.

The had been a time when we were close. A time when we were the only survivors of the assault on our pack, when staying together meant staying alive. Even as we had been taken in by the Mekong pack, and gone through the trials to adulthood, that closeness had remained. Maybe we would be close even now, if he had stayed in his place. Instead he had challenged and killed her father to take over the pack, and claimed her as his prize. That was the day he decided this fate. I had always intended to be alpha, and he knew it.

"You've always been a conceited welp," he says to me, his voice weak and tired.

His bait is as pathetic as he is. There's only way one to die as the head of a pack, and I'm enjoying knowing how much it must be rankling him to know he's going to be giving the entire bunch up to me.

"And you've always been a bitch," I reply. He comes at me with his claws again, but I'm only paying half as much attention to her as I was before. I catch his swipe in my human hand, notice how much bigger it has grown than the his claw, and then twist, breaking the limb at the wrist.

I'd waited to long to put an end to him, and to claim my prize as the youngest to ever rise to leader. It had been Lylyx who had asked me to wait, and in my youth I had thought I loved her, so I waited. She was as weak as her father had been, but her body was perfect for breeding. I would exult in taking her, and then I would cast her aside.

Tiberas backs up a step, casts his eyes to her. I see his weakness in them, his wasteful concern for others when he should only be thinking of himself. It's the reason he is Tiberas, soon to be dead werewolf, and I am Ulnyx, the youngest, the strongest, the most powerful. I don't even need my demon form to take this one, and so I kill him as a human, to embarrass him as he has embarrassed himself.

He sees it coming. His face registers fear, and to my surprise acceptance. I expect him to whine like a bitch in heat, but when I maneuver in and wrap my hands around his neck he looks at me with

indignation. Even as the breath drains from him and his eyes begin to bulge he looks at me. I squeeze harder, and he uses his last bit of air to laugh.

I howl in fury, shift to my were form and rend his flesh from his skeleton even as it begins to turn to dust. The black cloud of his soul rises from him, and I open my mouth to accept it, gaining his strength and power while I continue to molest his physical form. I only stop when there is nothing more to rip, to tear, to destroy. I feel a hand on my shoulder, and I turn with my claw raised to see Lylyx standing there, a hungry, feral smile on her face. I regain my human form, lift her to me, and put my lips to hers, claiming my first taste. It won't be the last.

* * *

When I regained myself, she was standing in front of the pack, looking down on me with a mixture of disdain and concern. Lylyx. She didn't look a day older than she had in the memory, though her sharp business suit was a stark contrast to the revealing deerskins she had sported in her past. How long ago had that been?

"Ulnyx," she said in a whisper. I could smell her surprise. "I heard you were killed by the diuscrucis."

I hesitated to reply. She thought I was the Great Were, and only the Great Were. In my tired state my link to Purgatory must have been weak enough that her Sight was only reading his power. Had his stirring overpowered Josette too?

"Lylyx," I said at last, bringing myself to my feet and pulling on Ulnyx's power to enhance the illusion of my identity, making sure to match my golden eye to the demon's. I was grateful to have the were's memories to guide me. "It's been a long time."

She smiled and stepped forward. "Too long," she said, reaching up and pulling my head down to hers. Her kiss was strong and sloppy, and I could feel the Great Were's soul howling at her call. I went along for the ride, not wanting to give anything away. Finally, she broke the kiss and took a step back.

"So the rumors aren't true? Nobody's heard from you in years."

"I'm here, aren't I?" I asked, trying to say as little about that as possible. "You're a bit far from home yourself."

She smiled and looked at me with big, round eyes, eyes that I could recall from other memories that weren't so clandestine. Ulnyx had tried to pretend he didn't love her. I had his soul, I knew the

truth. The creature standing in front of me was the only thing the demon cared for other than domination and power.

“The master sent me here with my strongest. I’m supposed to be keeping an eye out for the diuscrucis. We aren’t supposed to engage if we see him, just distract him a little bit.” She shrugged her shoulders, and then squinted her eyes and cocked her head. “You know what he looks like, don’t you?”

I let out a rough growl. “Whatever you heard, it’s wrong. I wasn’t with Reyzl in New York. We split months before. He became infatuated with this vampire girl, and was ready to supplant me in the chain.” I was proud of myself. It was a good lie.

“Vampire girl?” she asked. She spit on the ground. “You’re better off without him, and it looks like you dodged a bullet getting out of town before he showed up.”

I laughed. “You think I’m afraid of some crossbreed?”

She reached out and touched my face. “Of course not Ullie.” Ullie? “You’ve always been the strongest, and with the power Reyzl gave you...”

I reached out, wrapping an enlarged claw around her small throat. “Gave me?“ I shouted. “I take what I want. I’m given nothing!”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t struggle. After a moment I put her down. Playing the part of the Were was a little too easy for my own comfort.

"You're still the strongest," she said. "Help me keep an eye out for this diuscrucis, and I'll make it worth your while." She licked her bottom lip for emphasis, but I didn't need it to know what she was getting at.

“If I want you, I’ll have you,” I replied. My memories told me I had before, and she preferred it that way. She was goading Ulnyx because she knew it would get him all hot and bothered. Hot and bothered was the way to get what she wanted. “Save your innuendo.”

I took a good look at her pack. They had shifted back to human form, and were standing behind her looking nervous. “Your pack is pathetic,” I said.

They may have taken offense, but there was no way they were going to try to do anything about it. Instead, each one of them dropped their heads and looked straight at the ground.

“What did you expect?” Lylyx asked. “Our best stud gone off to

try to become an archwere, instead of staying with the pack and breeding?"

Ulnyx's soul was a fire in my gut. I closed my eyes to contain the burn. He had tried to breed, man he had tried. It was the Great Were's secret shame, the reason he had become a servant to anyone. He was sterile.

I opened my eyes, looked at Lylyx and laughed. "Look at us now," I said. "I'm here because your master asked me to come. He promised to bring me to the archwere so I could rip his throat out."

Lylyx looked confused. "He?" she asked. "Which master are you speaking of?"

My inhale caught on my throat. I had just assumed she was referring to Gervais – the only female I knew who this one could call master was Charis. "Gervais," I said.

A murmur rippled through the pack, and the weres around Lylyx perked up. I had the sinking feeling I had dropped the wrong name.

Time seemed to stop while Lylyx stared at me, her body motionless, her breathing escalating from calm and even, to shallow and quick. She was deciding what she was going to do with the information I had just given her, and the physical signs weren't positive.

"When I heard about Reyzl, I hoped you had made it out okay," she said. "When I didn't get any news about you at all, I feared the worst." She stepped back and put her hands out to her sides. "At least, I thought I had feared the worst."

Her hands began to turn into claws, and her body began to grow, shifting and elongating. Around her, the other weres began to shift as well.

"I name you, diuscrucis," she said. "I hear your lies, and I see through your deceptions. Ulnyx deserves a better fate than to have his power usurped by a crossbreed."

I felt Ulnyx recoil at the sight of her. Whatever had happened since they had last seen one another, he didn't know that Lylyx had been promoted. Standing in front of me was another Great Were.

Her attack was blazingly fast, and it was all I could do to step back out of the way and take hold of the fullness of Ulnyx's power, transforming myself into a bigger, stronger version of the female opposite me.

"Let me tell you," I said, blocking her next attack and landing a punch that sent her tumbling down the street. "Ullie is an asshole."

I heard the snarls, and a moment later I had a dozen weres circled around me, trying to get past my defenses. I imagined I probably looked ridiculous standing there, this huge beast of a demon crouched into one of Josette's martial stances, lashing out with chops and kicks like a big ugly Jackie Chan. I sent the weres sprawling, slamming them with feet and claws, leaving deep gashes in faces and abdomens. They howled and rolled back to their feet, growled and yelped and came in again, giving their leader the time she needed to regain her feet and get back into the fray.

I didn't see her return punch coming, and it knocked me to the ground. She didn't waste any time pouncing on me, trying to pin my arms at my sides, hoping that because I wasn't Ulnyx, I didn't have his raw strength. And I didn't have his raw strength. I could draw a lot of power from him, but it was like AC to DC, and I lost something in the conversion. Lucky for me, I had Josette's intimate knowledge of more complex hand-to-hand fighting to back me up. I used Lylyx's leverage against her, and tossed her backward over my head. Somehow she landed on her feet, and I had a dozen weres back at me before I could stand.

With the power from Ulnyx running through me, my physical fatigue had vanished, but his power was all I had. I could have done one on one against Lylyx, and maybe even as far as six on one. These odds were ridiculous, and even though I put up a good fight, it was a fight I knew I couldn't win. I managed to disembowel two of the weres, rip the throat out of another, and put a massive hurt on a fourth, but in the end Lylyx helped them drag me to the ground, and a well-placed stone to the back of my head took me the rest of the way out of the fight.

I lost control of the Great Were's power then, feeling my body shrink, even feeling the cold and wet of the night on my naked skin. I wished I could relish the feelings that had been evading me for so long, but the world grew fuzzy, and then vanished.

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I woke up in a small room, a simple room with stone walls, a small square window, a bed, a wooden door, and a clutter of straw-filled dolls that lay scattered around the floor. I wasn't alone in the room. A fourteen-year-old girl with a plain face and brown hair was sitting on the bed next to me. An older man with long black hair tied back in a ponytail was leaning against the wall, looking out the room's only window into a pasture beyond.

"Josette," I said, recognizing the girl. Her smile pierced me, and I could feel my heart begin to race. I reached out and wrapped my arms around her, holding her tight while she patted my back.

"Landon," she said softly. "I've missed you."

"You know I've missed you," I replied.

"Touching. Really," the man said.

"Piss off Ullie," I said, breaking the embrace and staring down the demon. "What are you doing here anyway?"

I knew what this place was from the memories - Josette's Source. Somehow, I had found my way here after the weres had knocked me out. The good news, it meant they hadn't killed me …

yet.

"It's your party," he replied. "If you didn't want me along, you never should have invited me."

Not that I had a choice. Now I was stuck with him. "I liked you better when you didn't say anything," I said. "Your power is useful, your mouth isn't."

I was rewarded with a chuckle. Josette squeezed my hand and regained my attention before I could say anything else. She started to speak, but I put my hand to her lips to stop her.

"I'm sorry Josette, but can one of you please tell me what the heck is going on here? For the last five years you've both been silent except for these random memories that leave me struggling to stand, and now all of a sudden I get knocked out, and you're both here? One of you I'm happy to see, but your timing kind of sucks."

"Be glad you have me, Landon," Ulnyx said. "I'm the only reason you're still alive."

"Care to elaborate?" I asked.

Ulnyx bent over and picked up one of the straw dolls. "It's like this, meat," he said. "Lylyx has a thing for me. She always has. Man, no matter how hard I tried to satisfy her, she always wanted more. It's sexy as hell, and so I have this thing for her too."

"She wanted your puppies," I said. "You're sterile."

I knew it would send him into a rage, especially since Josette was there. He didn't disappoint, taking the straw doll and tearing it in half. He tried to come at me, but a thought was all I needed to hold him in place. I still owned his soul.

"Yeah, anyway," he said, his anger falling away in an instant, "if she's been promoted to a Great Were, it means her master has major mojo, at least as much as Reyzl, and probably more. She's going to see if she can have me extracted."

"Can that be done?" I asked, suddenly hopeful. I wouldn't mind ridding myself of the demon, now that I didn't need his soul anymore. I would miss his power, but not his twisted memories.

"It can't be done," Josette said. "Anyone who says it can is lying."

"How do you know, Miss Priss?" Ulnyx asked, leering at the angel. Another thought, and his head turned to look out the window.

"It's been attempted before," she replied. "Gervais has a laboratory where he performs certain… experiments." We both

shivered at the memory of the room, more torture chamber than science lab. “I’ve seen him try. Once a soul is absorbed, it is entwined with that of the bearer. Trying to unravel it destroys both.”

Ulnyx sighed. “I wish you angels could lie once in awhile. The truth is crap.”

I swallowed my disappointment. “I get that our souls are connected,” I said. “I can feel that when I tap your power. That doesn’t answer why all this time I’ve only been able to catch whispers, and now we’re all having a pow-wow in your Source.”

Josette shook her head. “I don’t know, fellow,” she said. “I could hear you calling out to me, and I tried to call back, but you never heard me. Ever since I gave you my soul, I’ve been lost in the dark, aware of your experience, but at the same time cut off from you. When Izak summoned me, I saw a hint of light for the first time in years. I spoke to you, and you heard.” Tears began to run down her round face.

“It hasn’t been a picnic for me either, sister,” Ulnyx said. “I’ve had to listen to this one pray, listen to her cry, listen to her bitch and moan. ‘Oh my daughter,’” he raised his voice in pitch and held his hands up in hopelessness. I threw him against the wall.

“Shut it Ullie,” I said. “I can make your eternity worse than being in Hell.”

The Were swallowed and nodded. “Well, it sucks being here,” he said. “Sometimes you’re fun, like when you turned on that dude Silas.” He laughed. “Oh, and the way you played Lylyx was classic. Damn that kiss was nice.”

“Do you have anything helpful to say?” I asked.

“I’ve been kicking and screaming in here too,” he said. “There’s this light always shining down on me. Man, it was dim right after you got that witch to snuff herself. Then, when I smelled Lylyx, it just pushed me over the edge. If I had to guess, I would say your own power drowns us out most of the time. You get pooped, we get let out of our cages.”

“There’s only one of you I’d prefer caged,” I said.

“I’m sorry Landon,” Josette said. “I believe it is an all or nothing proposition. However; if you can learn to control it, we may be of some use to you. At the very least, it might help with the memories.”

“Be of use?” Ulnyx asked. “Don’t look at me, I’m not about to

help you out."

I threw Ulnyx against the wall again, and then began to compress his body. He cried out as his bones shattered from the force. "I can do this all day," I said. My control over the demon's soul was complete.

"Okay, okay," he begged. I let him straighten up. "I guess if I'm stuck with you, I might as well throw you a bone once in awhile."

I ignored him, struck by a thought that had crossed me before, but I had dismissed. "Tell me," I said. "If I were less powerful, and I had absorbed a couple of demons who were much more powerful, do you think I would hear them talking to me all the time?"

They didn't answer right away.

"Landon," Josette said at last. "I know what you are thinking, but it doesn't work that way. Even if Rebecca could hear Merov and Reyzl, she has total domination over them. She could quiet them if she wished."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but I nodded. "But maybe they said something to her. Told her some lie, tricked her into leaving."

Ulnyx face-palmed. "Man, you've got to let it go. She's a demon. She lives to take power, not play house. Maybe she cared for you, but you can't deny your nature. Not forever. Face the fact that you were duped and move on."

I hated to admit it. I hated to accept it. I'd been holding onto hope, but it was fading fast.

"That may be the first smart thing I've ever heard you say," I told the demon. "Now, let's talk about Lylyx's master. I thought it was Gervais, but that's obviously wrong. Whoever is Commanding her, they're female."

"It has to be the Demon Queen," Josette said.

"No," I replied. "She gave me the Grail. She told me Reyzl was going to turn on me. She had her blood blessed by an archangel, and she wanted me to win. Why would she do that just to turn on me five years later?"

"You know the answer," Ulnyx said. "How many times do you have to have your balls yanked by a foxy hellion before you wise up?"

Demons were patient, and they were masters of deception and manipulation. I had already been over that thread with Dante. "The Outcast's servant was sure it was Gervais."

Ulnyx shrugged. "So they're working together. Probably having

some fun in their spare time. Where's the confusion?"

It was possible they were in it together. I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice by trusting my female alter ego too far. Right now it didn't matter. Even if they were tag-teaming me, if I could get to Gervais, I could get to Sarah. Charis had outmatched me the first time we had met, but that was five years ago. I had learned a few more tricks since then. Hopefully more than she had.

"Okay genius," I said to the Were. "It doesn't hurt to assume you're right. We have one little problem, in that your girlfriend has my body, and I'm unconscious."

"You're going to wake up eventually, and like I said, she won't harm you while she thinks she can get me out. She's a bitch, but she's my bitch, and I don't want you to destroy her." Ulnyx smiled - a vicious, devious smile. "Here's what you're going to do."

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When I woke, it was dark. Not that dark meant much to me. It only took me a second to recognize that I was squeezed into a too-small sealed enclosure, my body contorted in a way that would make anyone cringe. I felt the pain of my burning muscles, but I had felt much worse, so I didn't let it distract me. Instead, I focused on my sarcophagus, recognizing the feel of metal, looking for a locking mechanism. I smiled when I found the tumblers. A safe of some kind; it would be easy enough to get out of.

Except, I didn't even try. Ulnyx had given me a plan, and it seemed like a good one. Despite the pain and discomfort, patience was the best course of action.

I focused on my Sight, finding Lylyx without difficulty. She was less than twenty feet away, I closed my eyes and focused on enhancing my hearing. She was on the phone.

"Yes, master," she said. "Yes, I know you said to distract him, but I did better than that. He's nowhere near as strong as you thought. I captured him." She stopped to listen, and I could smell her fear, even through the steel box. "Yes, master. I was only trying

to make you proud. I'm sorry. You want me to let him go? I don't understand? What do you mean it isn't time yet? No, master, I'm not questioning you. Yes, master. I'll leave him in Chantilly. Please, I'm sorry. Thank you, thank you. I won't fail you again."

I heard her take the phone from her ear and put it on the desk. The chair slid back on a wooden floor, and a door opened.

"Get the truck," she called out. The door closed again, and then I heard her bare feet whispering along the hardwood. She stopped right outside the safe, crouched down and whispered. "Ullie, if you can hear me, I've never stopped loving you. I want to get you out of there, but if I don't do what the master says I'll be in worse shape than you are."

"If you don't let me out of this safe, you won't have to worry about it," I said. I smiled when she gasped.

"Wasn't being beaten down once enough for you diuscrucis?" she asked, recovering from her surprise.

"I'm afraid not," I said. "Hey, I have a question for you. Do you accept that I've absorbed Ulnyx's soul and have domination over him?" I added the last part myself. I hope the Were heard it.

She paused. "I accept that you've absorbed his soul, but if your ability in a fight is any indication, domination isn't a word I'd use."

The snark didn't matter. What did matter was that she had confirmed Ulnyx's continued existence, which was the lynchpin of the demon's plan. Apparently, there was some odd loophole in were law that I could take advantage of provided she acknowledged him. It was his way of getting me what I wanted, and also something he wanted. A demon wouldn't do it any other way.

"In that case," I said. "As the former alpha, I challenge you leadership of the pack."

I heard her gasp again. I smelled her renewed fear, though it was nothing compared to what she had exhibited when she was on the phone. We hadn't factored that fear in, but it would play right into my hands.

"What kind of trick is this?" she hissed. "You have no right to challenge."

I focused, finding the deadbolts and crushing them. She backed up when the door swung open and I pushed myself out, falling into a lump on the floor. Muscles and tendons popped back into place, my body healing almost instantly. I hadn't realized how drained I was becoming by never shutting down. I felt stronger than I had in

a long time.

I rose smoothly to my feet, facing her, and felt a sudden rush of blood to my head. I hadn't expected her to be nude. She stirred something in me that I knew wasn't wholly mine.

"Wow," I whispered, the word escaping me before I could catch it. She truly was a work of art, but that wasn't part of the plan. "Pack laws don't distinguish the meat," I said, pulling my eyes up to her eyes. "Otherwise the strongest wouldn't be able to claim new shells. You just confirmed that Ulnyx's soul is inside of me, and that makes me eligible to challenge. They're your rules, not mine."

She backed up a few steps, her eyes dropping to my own naked form. I fought to stay confident, despite her gaze on my overly cooperative midriff.

"You've put me in an uncomfortable position diuscrucis," she said, looking back up at my face. What about the uncomfortable position she had me in? "When I win, I'll be forced to answer to the master for killing you."

I tried not to smirk, but I couldn't help it. Ulnyx had told me how he thought this would play out, but Lylyx's overwhelming fear of her master was making it much easier. I couldn't communicate with either of them now that I was awake and my energy had been restored, but I knew they would experience the moment. I could imagine the demon's glee.

"You aren't going to win," I said. "In fact, you're going to lose on purpose, because it's the only way you have a chance to survive."

Her anger flared, but she didn't argue. Instead, she walked across the room, rocking her hips suggestively. I ignored the temptation to follow her retreat, instead taking in my surroundings. Judging from the faded yellow striped wallpaper, the worn hardwood floor, the arched wood roofing, the filthy windows, and the pasture beyond, I figured I was on the top floor of an old farmhouse. It must have been the master suite, or an apartment, because there was one door which I knew led out to the rest of the house, and another that led into the bedroom, and beyond it the bathroom. That was where Lylyx was headed.

She returned a minute later in a white silk robe that covered her modesty, but didn't leave much to the imagination. I could feel Ulnyx still buzzing below the surface like the caged animal he was. She tossed me a matching robe.

“Not that I mind the view,” she said. “But it’ll be easier to do business this way.”

I caught the robe, fighting to keep my face from flushing. I slipped it on and focused, re-rendering it into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt. I did the same to her clothes; not a glamour, but an actual alteration. It seemed simple, but that kind of precision had taken months to develop. Judging by a sudden change in the atmosphere, she knew it was no parlor trick.

“I agree,” I said.

“Last night?” she said. It was obvious she had just realized how badly she’d underestimated me.

“I had a long day, and was running out of steam,” I replied. “You should have killed me when you had the chance.”

She looked at me like that was the dumbest idea she had ever heard. “Kill you? Do you know what she would have done to me for killing you? Besides, you have Ulnyx in you, I can see him in your eye. I’m not stupid, I know extraction is a supposed to be a myth, but there are rumors there’s a djinn in Moscow who can do it.”

I filed that tidbit away. Josette had said it couldn’t be done, but there wouldn’t be any harm in paying this djinn a visit once Sarah was safe. “You keep talking about your master. I know it isn’t Gervais, so who is it?”

Her face blanched. “The Demon Queen,” she said.

I tried to stay stone-faced, to not give anything away. My heart began to pound, my mind began to race, and I knew I had blown it. The witch had been right, I was a fool.

“She sent an archvampire to our den with the phone,” Lylyx continued, her voice frightened in response to my body language. “She told me if I would follow her, she would make me Great.” She smiled. “Of course I agreed. I’ve been in charge of the pack since Ullie left, but I’m getting old, and it was only a matter of time before I was challenged to a fight I couldn’t win.” She laughed. “I didn’t expect you to be the one to make that challenge.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. It was better to know what I was dealing with. It was better to know Charis had suckered me, but to what end? I clamped down on my emotions and opened my eyes again.

“Your time is up,” I said. I walked over to the desk and picked up the cellphone. “She calls you on this?”

Lylyx nodded. I looked at the contact list. I wasn’t familiar with

the country code, but it wasn't the United States. I pushed the call button.

"Nobody's going to pick up," she said. "She calls me, I don't call her."

I let it ring eight times, and then got disconnected. It was worth a shot. "Who was the vampire?" I asked.

"His name is Cho. He's based in Japan. He looks like you can knock him over with a feather, but he laid out ten of my pack and fed on one, just to show me that he could."

Cho. I knew the name, but I had never met him. The angels cut him a pretty wide path; an indication of his power. It seemed Charis was gearing up for war.

I put the phone back on the table, and then heard a ring. Not from this phone, another one in the bedroom. I found my own cell sitting on a dresser. Obi. He'd have to wait.

"So," Lylyx said, joining me in the bedroom. "I think I know what's going on now, but how did you know about the law?" She stepped right up to me, invading my personal space. Her scent had changed again, to something decidedly more enticing. She was close enough that I could feel the heat of her body radiating outward.

"Ulnyx told me," I said, trying to back up and finding only the bed behind me. She knew exactly what she was doing.

"You can talk to him?" she asked, surprised. She inched herself forward, tightening an increasingly small gap.

"Only when I'm not awake, it seems. He's an asshole, but he cares for you. He..."

She leaped at me, pushing me back onto the bed and shoving her lips up against mine. I could feel Ulnyx struggling against me. He was testing me, and whether she knew it or not, she was helping him.

My control over him was absolute. I sealed off my mind to the Were, feeling the loss of his power as I used my own to disconnect us. I overwhelmed him, punishing him for even trying. I pulled myself away from Lylyx, rolling out from under her and getting to my feet. She turned over and spread herself out on the bed.

"If you're going to be alpha," she said, "you have an obligation to breed."

"An alpha is obliged to nothing," I replied. "Now get up, and let's get this done. I need to be in Paris." I left her laying there, heading for the door out into the rest of the house.

“Wait a minute,” she said, hopping off the bed and rushing in behind me. I turned to face her. “Let’s get this straight before we go down. You make the challenge, I accept. We go outside, we fight. You’re going to pin me, right?”

I shrugged. “Unless you’d rather I kill you.”

Her expression was pure lust. “Now you sound like Ullie,” she said.

I shook my head and pushed open the door. As expected, it opened out into a short hallway with a couple of doors on either side and a stairway directly to the right. I took the stairs down with Lylyx trailing close behind.

The remainder of the pack, minus the ones I had killed and the two that had gone to get the truck, were sitting in the living room of the house, watching some kind of French ‘Three Stooges’ rip-off on an old tube television with bent rabbit ears. They were spread out across a beat sofa, a rocking chair, and a worn burlap rug, dressed in their finest jeans, tees, and leathers. Six males and a female, their heads swung around in unison when I stepped on a creaky floorboard.

“Seriously?” I asked, motioning at the television. Their lips curled in response, and they began to rise. Lylyx stepped around me and stayed them with her hand before they could get themselves in trouble.

“What the hell is this?” asked the female on the rocking chair, a too-young girl with short black hair and a large skull tattoo on her neck.

“Relax,” Lylyx said. “The diuscrucis has Ulnyx’s soul. He knows our laws, and he’s challenged me.”

Seven mouths gaped open.

“He can’t do that,” one of the males on the floor said. He looked like a model, with a petite frame and high cheekbones.

“He can,” Lylyx countered. “He has Ulnyx’s soul - he’s already proven it to me. Our laws are clear. Follow me outside.”

I could tell they didn’t want to go. I could tell they would have preferred to try to rip my throat out. It didn’t matter. Lylyx turned and opened the front door, leading us outside onto an old porch in sore need of some paint. The small box truck pulled up a few seconds later, and the remaining two weres jumped out. Lylyx raised her hand to them also, and when they saw their pack mates, they fell in line.

“Where do you want to do this?” she asked me.

I scanned the area. There was a small pasture off to the right of the house. “In the pasture,” I said. “That way your pups can wait behind the fence.”

She nodded, and we walked over. Once we’d hopped the short chicken wire fence, she turned to her brethren. “You all stand witness to the diuscrucis…”

“Landon,” I interrupted.

“You all stand witness to Landon’s challenge for leadership of the Mekong pack. I have acknowledged him as the rightful bearer of Ulnyx, the former alpha of our pack, and have accepted his challenge.”

There were a few growls and grumbles, but no one said anything.

“Just come at me like you think you can win,” I said. “Don’t hold anything back.”

Lylyx smiled. “I hadn’t planned on it. I want to see what you’ve got.”

We separated by twenty feet, and Lylyx shifted, her body growing and elongating until she had the demonic form of the Great Were. I remembered Ulnyx’s battle against Tiberas, and how he had remained in human form to embarrass the old were. I renewed my connection to the demon, feeling his power running along with mine once more, and allowed my form to change.

The weres outside of the pasture howled in support of Lylyx as she made her first attack, charging in quickly, faking left, and kicking out at my left knee with her right foot. It might have been a good move twelve hours ago, but I was at the top of my game now. I stepped lightly aside and grabbed her leg in my massive claws, and then pushed forward, forcing her to either allow her leg to break or be knocked onto the ground. She tumbled backward, and I came down on top of her.

“Not so bad, is it?” she asked in a throaty growl. I was suddenly aware of myself, and she used the distraction to rake her claws across my face, and then knee me in the groin and throw me aside.

I rolled to my feet, just in time to block two more quick strikes. “Clever,” I said, catching her wrist and pulling her into my foot. The reverse force sent her bouncing to the opposite side of the pasture. She shot back up and charged again.

She was all teeth and nails, scratching, clawing, and biting at me

while I batted her strikes aside with efficient ease. She was skilled, I admit, but I had already been delayed long enough. I ducked under her next blow and rushed forward, grappling with her and taking her to the ground like a linebacker. It was ugly, but it did the job. Once her weight was below mine, it was only a matter of time before I had gotten hold of her arms and pinned her.

"Surrender," I said.

"No," she replied, wriggling and twisting, trying to break the hold.

I hadn't expected that. I leaned in and took her neck in my razor jaws, biting down hard enough to draw blood. I could taste it on my lips, at once exciting and disgusting. She roared in pain, and ceased struggling.

"Fine," she said. "I surrender."

I jumped off of her and shifted, knitting my torn clothes back together. Once Lylyx had changed, I pulled her to her feet, noticing the mark and bruising where I had bit her.

Lylyx had been alpha of the Mekong pack, but she had nothing to transfer, because Ulnyx had already taken it. There was no mojo to make me commander-in-chief, no special powers to bestow. It was kind of anti-climatic. The only real difference was that when we retreated back over the fence, the other weres all followed behind us without a word.

"So, now what?" Lylyx asked, once we had returned to the master bedroom. I had left the pack downstairs, and instructed them to leave the television off.

"Change your clothes and meet me downstairs," I said, grabbing her cell and updating my wardrobe to my standard blacks - leather jacket, polo, jeans, and boots. "I have to make a phone call. Do you have any transportation besides the truck?"

"There's a bike stashed in the barn out back. Am I coming with you?"

Another bike? I wasn't excited about the prospect. We hadn't staged the show just to leave her there waiting for Cho to come put an end to her. That was part of the agreement I had made with Ulnyx.

"Yes. Bring the bike around with you," I said, shutting the door to the bedroom, and heading downstairs.

I stopped at the bottom and whistled to get the attention of the weres, who were talking amongst themselves. They silenced in an

instant, giving me their complete attention.

"I have a feeling you won't be safe here," I said. "Lylyx and I are headed back to Paris. I want you to find somewhere else to hang out for awhile."

"How about Versailles?" the model joked. He started laughing, until I stared him down. Take any crap, and they would just keep giving it. I had learned a lot in the last five years.

"There's a small bed and breakfast in Chantilly," the girl with the tattoo said. "We can check in there."

I looked at her and smiled. "Sounds good," I said. Her face turned red in response. "You're in charge. Take these other mongrels and lay low until you hear from Lylyx or me."

The other weres all looked to her. I could feel their jealousy over my favor. Weres were weird. She got to her feet and started barking orders, getting them ready to go.

I pulled my cell phone from my pocket the moment I stepped out of the farmhouse, unlocking it and navigating into my list of missed calls. Obi had tried me three more times while I had been out mud wrestling. I hit the call button.

He picked up after three rings, sounding agitated. "Hey, man, I called you like five times already," he said. "You should try picking up your phone sometime."

My mind flipped through a few witty retorts, but I abandoned them for simplicity. "It's not easy being me," I said. "I assume you have something?"

He laughed. "Yeah, of course I have something. It's a latitude, longitude, and date. The date is today. I put it into Google Maps, guess what I got?"

"Yankee Stadium?" I guessed. Not likely.

"Damn Yankees. I'm a Red Sox fan. Try Eiffel Tower. Aren't you in Paris?"

Eiffel tower? Then it was no coincidence that I was here, now. Or that Lylyx had been sent to distract me, not stop me, and that she had said something about it not being time yet. I was supposed to take that data, supposed to look for the pattern. Whoever had planted it, they had a little too much faith in me. Or maybe they knew I would turn it over to Obi, and that he would be able to crack it?

"Hey, you there man?" Obi asked.

I swallowed my heart. "I'm here. This just got a lot more

complicated. What time?"

"Nine o'clock, French. You need me to catch a flight out?"

After everything I had said in my anger, the minute he thought I needed him, he was ready to back me up. "No, thanks," I said. "Listen, I'm sorry for the crap that I dumped on you. It's been tough."

There was a silent pause. I could hear him let out a deep breath. "Don't sweat it, man," he said at last. "I can't pretend to know what it's like, so I won't. All I want is respect for my own decisions."

I didn't know what to say. I heard the rough tumble of a motorcycle coming to life out behind the house.

"My ride's coming," I said. "If you want to do me another favor, track down Thomas and see if he'd be willing to risk his heavenly eternity to help me out. Tell him it could be super important. All I need him to do is trace a pair of fangs onto the front of the chest in the corner. Once its open, take a look at my notes inside, and see what you can do with it. Start at JFK, that's where I saw him last."

I didn't know how relevant the mystery I had been trying to unravel would be to my current predicament, but I was starting to feel like there were answers to something in there, and that I would need those answers sooner rather than later. Still, the contents of the chest were my most closely guarded physical secret, and it wasn't easy to trust Obi to it. It was even harder to ask him to find Thomas. Trust sucked like that, I realized. No matter how many times it burned you, you couldn't live without it, or you'd always be empty and alone.

"Can do," Obi said. "Give 'em hell." He disconnected.

I couldn't ignore how striking Lylyx was when she tore around the house on a fancy Italian pocket-rocket. She had covered her skull in a full black helmet with a wolf's head airbrushed on it, the fangs bared around the front so it looked like it was eating her head, and traded her clothes for a white tee and leathers that accentuated everything feminine. She skidded to a stop next to me.

"I'm ready to roll boss," she said, patting the seat behind her. "Hop on."

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I thought about driving the bike myself, but decided I would rather conserve my energy for whatever was going to happen once we got back into the city. I slipped over the saddle and wrapped my arms lightly around Lylyx's stomach, and then clutched her tighter when she launched away from the farmhouse. We rocketed down a gravel driveway and out onto a narrow paved road that split a pair of fields. This really was the middle of nowhere. I was amazed my cell had worked here.

"Any specific place in Paris, or are we just going sightseeing?" Lylyx asked, shouting back at me over the noise of the wind.

"I need to pay a visit to Gervais," I said. "He's taken something that he shouldn't have."

I gripped her tight enough to cause her to squeal after she nearly wrecked at hearing the archfiend's name.

"I'm beginning to question whether or not I should have just let you kill me," she said, getting her nerves and the bike back under control.

I ignored the remark. "He has an entrance to his chateau tucked

away in the Paris sewers. I'm not sure where just yet, but I'm working on it."

I closed my eyes and floated through Josette's memories, searching for the path to the demon's hidden transport rift. She had never made it all the way into that part of the sewer because Gervais had rigged it with wards that angels couldn't cross, but she could at least get me that far.

I could feel the warmth of Josette's soul touching my own as I mingled with her, an unseen hand that guided me towards the information that I sought. She had been there every time I had delved into her experiences, I realized. I just hadn't known how to recognize her. I focused, trying to reach out with my soul to touch her warmth, her hand. I felt myself drifting towards it, the warmth growing, until I passed through and discovered I had dove in too far. The darkness behind my closed eyes vanished, replaced with the eerie glow of the past.

* * *

"Where did he go?" Shiva asks, shifting his torch back and forth, trying to keep us bathed in at least a small amount of light.

We're standing near the dead end of a narrow alley between two hôtels particuliers in the Marais district. I can hear the clomping of horse hooves and the creaking of wheels as a carriage trundles past behind us, likely bringing a wealthy merchant home for the evening. I turn my head left and right, then rotate it to look up. The walls of the hotels are smooth and clean, the windows still intact. He didn't go that way.

"I don't know," I say, looking back down the alley towards the street. "Perhaps he snuck past in the shadows." It wouldn't be the first time he had evaded me in this way.

"This is getting to be a much larger problem than we thought," Shiva says. "Your brother has been consolidating his power, and now he moves about almost freely in the night. Even you are unable to keep up with him."

My capitaine was right. He most often was. Gervais had been active in the last few weeks, murdering other fiends in the area and taking their holdings for his own. It had fallen to us to put a stop to him before he achieved the levels of power he so clearly lusted for, power that would make him difficult to challenge directly.

I lower my head, feeling shameful for losing him. Gervais had always

bested me, no matter the challenge. I kick a stone in frustration, sending it clattering along the cobblestone and into the darkness. I'm about to apologize to Shiva verbally when we hear a faint plunk rise from the black.

"I've been a fool," Shiva says, running forward with the torch. He lowers it to the ground, revealing an open hole in the ground and a metal grate placed directly next to it. He moves to jump down, but I hesitate.

"What about nightstalkers?" I ask. "We should return with more of our fellows."

Shiva shakes his head. "There is no time, Josette," he says. "We may not have another chance to get this close to him while he is weakened."

Indeed, we have chased him from the home of a nearby Turned noble who had betrayed him to a rival. We came upon them both in the middle of their battle, killing the other fiend before Gervais could take his soul.

I respond by jumping into the hole, fluttering my wings beneath my loose blouse to slow the descent. Shiva is right behind me, and the torch returns our sight.

"Look," I say, pointing at a splotch of blood on the side of the brick sewer wall. Gervais had taken a deep cut to his abdomen from a hellfired blade during the fight.

"This way," Shiva says, heading deeper into the sewers at a full run. I follow along behind, fearful of losing the light from his torch. I know this is a bad idea, but what choice do I have?

We have to stop every twenty yards to check the walls, to follow the trail of blood. It makes following after my brother slow, and with each step I'm more certain he's gotten away. We pass from a smaller tunnel into a larger one, then come to a silent stop. The torch is casting just enough light for us to see the nightstalkers up ahead, leaning over, feeding on one of their own. It has a dagger sticking out of its neck. It's dark, but the size and shape are familiar.

"We're on the right path," Shiva says.

"Capitaine," I say in a whisper. "This is a hopeless pursuit. We can barely even see down here. Look at them feeding, he is minutes ahead."

Shiva looks thoughtful for a moment, considering my opinion. "If we die in service of our Lord, then so be it," he says. "We must take big risks to have big success."

I am a servant, and so I nod and hold my sword out in front of me. "I will clear the path," I say, rushing forward into the darkness before

Shiva can stop me.

It's much easier to fight in the dark than it is to move in the dark. I close my eyes and concentrate on my Sight, feeling their presence, registering their every movement while I put years of training into play.

I hear the rustle of a shirt-sleeve and twist, avoiding a pale hand and lashing out with my blade to impale the nightstalker. I kick it back out of the way and duck under a grab, reach into my boot for a dagger and stab back into the demon's knee.

Hot breath on my neck alerts me and I spin, sweeping my leg along the ground, pushing through the impact, following the sound of the creature knocking against the wall and sending my dagger airborne into it.

I leap upward, fluttering my wings to gain more height, and lash out with my boot, hearing the crunch of bone as the last one's head is snapped backward. I stab this one, and then stand calmly in the center of the melee, the smell of frankincense strong in the enclosed space.

I open my eyes.

"Well done," Shiva says, patting me on the shoulder. He aims the torch at the passage beyond. "This way."

I lose track of how long we are in the sewer. We follow a path that appears below us, a worn avenue of motion that keeps the grime of the tunnels away. It speeds our progress, but it doesn't calm my nerves. The path is too worn for a single demon, too worn for even a handful of nightstalkers. What will we find at the end?

The tunnel opens up into a large room, lit by sconces of hellfire. I swallow to try to quell my fear. The room is filled with skulls and bones, stacked neatly along the walls, piled twelve feet high from floor to ceiling. It reminds me of the catacombs, but we aren't in the catacombs. There is a large demon skull on the other side of the room, its mouth spread open in a horrified howl. Through the mouth is another tunnel that vanishes in the darkness beyond. Gervais' torn shirt lays discarded in the center of the room.

"We're getting close," Shiva says. Such is the focus of his pursuit that he seems oblivious to the grotesquery of our surroundings. He reaches Gervais' shirt and bends down to examine it, at the same time I see the corner of a rune sticking out from the edge.

"Shiva, wait," I cry. I'm too late. He lifts the shirt and exposes the runes scratched into the floor. A spout of hellfire rises, the flames lashing into his head, igniting his hair and clothes. He's an effigy, his arms outstretched, his body aflame. He has no time to cry out in pain before

he is consumed. Then, he is gone.

My breathing is ragged, and my eyes are streaming tears. I hold my sword in front of me and rush forward, desperate to reach my brother, desperate to make him pay. He knew I would be the cautious one. He knew I would survive.

As soon as I pass into the demon skull's open maw I begin to feel the pressure. I take three more steps, and my head feels as though it will explode. I see the runes encircling the tunnel, carved into the stone as far as I can see before the light no longer reveals it. I cannot pass, so I back up. I sit on the floor and cry, knowing that I still need to find my way to the surface, and the torch is gone.

* * *

My vision snapped back into focus, finding itself on the rear of Lylyx's helmet, the traffic sweeping by on both sides of us as she weaved her way towards Paris.

"Landon," she shouted. "Landon."

"I'm here," I said. "Just doing some soul-searching."

I fought to shake off the feelings of despair and hopelessness that Josette had been experiencing while she sat alone in the room of skulls and bones. I put my hand up to my forehead, rubbing my temple to try to shake the hangover. I needed to get better control of my inherited memories, because the reenactments were a serious drain.

"We're five minutes out," she said. "Do you have a destination for me?"

I took a deep breath and gathered myself, reaching gently for Josette and feeling her presence as a feather on the edge of my soul. "Marais," I replied.

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Le Marais was one of the oldest districts in France, a former aristocratic section of the city that had once been home to Victor Hugo and Robespierre. Today, it maintained its architectural charm and grace, while also supporting a much more eclectic manner of Parisian. Le Marais held its share of historical hotels, trendy restaurants and posh art galleries, as well as gay clubs and cabarets.

I had kept my senses focused while Lylyx had navigated us through the City of Light. I knew we had passed by a few vampires lurking in the shadows of the surrounding buildings, as well as two or three angels who were keeping an eye on the machinations of the vamps. None of them gave us any trouble, and I had cloaked myself to better match Lylyx so as not to draw any added attention.

My plan for finding Gervais' underground rift wasn't much of a plan at all. Lylyx circled the bike through the streets of Paris while I looked for any kind of visual cues that would either register as familiar, or cause some kind of emotional flood from Josette's past. I was a little worried I would find myself back in her memories, but there didn't seem to be any way around it. It was true that I could

have gone straight to the archfiend's chateau; I knew from Josette exactly where to find it, but she had felt it was too risky and I was inclined to agree.

We were cruising past the Picasso Museum when I felt a familiar heat fall into my Sight. A hint of a smile played across the edge of my face, and I tapped Lylyx on the shoulder and pointed her down a connecting street. The roads were narrow in Le Marais, and it took us a few tries to find the right pattern to get closer to the target.

"Where are we going?" Lylyx asked.

I had made her stop the bike, and we had continued on foot, down another narrow corridor to stand in front of a tall wrought iron gate. Beyond the gate was a dark alley, and I knew I would find my quarry at its rear.

"The entrance to the sewers is down there," I said.

"I smell something else down there," she replied. "Something old and powerful."

I focused, pulling the iron gate out of the way. "That's how I know we're in the right place."

The buildings on either side of the alley were tall, and blocked any chance the sun had of making its way down into their depths. The darkness cast by the shadows held a palpable, eerie quality that was edging its way under my skin. Even though Josette's hunt for Gervais had happened hundreds of years ago, I could almost feel the energy of it hanging in the air.

I was about to ask Lylyx if she had a Bic, or a match, or something so I could create some light to pierce the blackness. It wasn't that I needed it to see, but something about the darkness was making me strangely uncomfortable. Before I had a chance to, a small flame flickered to life a dozen yards ahead, illuminating its wielder in temporal light. A sharp, devilish grin behind a neatly groomed beard, on a narrow, angled face.

Lylyx gasped, and stopped walking. She started to step backward, but I grabbed her arm. "Come on," I said. "He's with me."

She looked at me like I was crazy, but she didn't say anything. I held her arm until we reached Izak. I saw he was perched at the edge of a hole in the ground, the sewer grate already placed off to the side.

"Good to see you again," I said, clapping the demon on the

shoulder.

He looked at Lylyx and furrowed his brow.

“It’s a long story, but I’ve had a little bit of an adventure since we split up. Izak, this is Lylyx. I’m sure you can See she’s a Great Were.”

Izak nodded. He cast the hellfire into the air so he could hold out his hand for her to shake. He didn’t do it to be friendly, he did it to show the runes running up his wrist.

She tentatively took it and gave it a light shake. “I’m also Ulnyx’s mate,” she said, casting a sidelong glance my way. The whole thing was some kind of weird demon pissing match. The logic of it eluded me.

“Have you been down?” I asked Izak.

He shook his head.

I focused my Sight, reaching down into the depths, and finding it didn’t stretch very far. I guess we were going in blind. I turned to Lylyx. “Stay behind us. We aren’t going to have much room to maneuver down there, so hulking up is out of the question.”

She didn’t look comfortable. “I guess now isn’t a good time to mention that I’m claustrophobic?”

“You can mention it,” I replied. “But it doesn’t change anything. Izak, take the lead.”

The fiend jumped down into the hole, his flame trailing behind him. I stepped up to the hole and found the hellfire resting at the bottom next to Izak’s face.

“I should have let you kill me,” Lylyx said. I jumped.

I landed on a puff of air, creating only the slightest splash in the inch deep run of wastewater flowing through the tunnel. I could See Lylyx standing above us, and I could smell her fear. I knew when it changed from apprehension to determination. I held out my arms and caught her gently, finding her in my arms looking up at me with big, dark eyes. I felt Ulnyx stirring.

“Thanks for the catch,” she purred, her hand reaching around behind me to find purchase somewhere else.

I deposited her roughly, ignoring the position of her hand on my rear. “Just stay behind us,“ I said.

“With pleasure,” she replied.

I stayed focused on my Sight as we walked, even though it could only penetrate a short distance further than my eyes. The sewers seemed clear, but there was a tangible charge in the atmosphere, a

foreboding that this was only the calm before the storm. I was thankful to have Izak with me because he knew where we were going, saving us from a lot of stumbling around in the cavernous maze of tunnels.

As we walked, I was able to pick out some areas of the brickwork where Gervais had passed by so many years before, the dark splatter of his blood still leaving its indelible stain along the surface. I could sense the pull of it through Josette's soul, an invitation to explore in greater depth. I could feel her invisible hand resting on me, feeding me her strength.

"Nightstalkers," Lylyx whispered from behind me. I couldn't See anything, so I stopped and turned towards her. "Ulnyx never did have a very good sense of smell," she said. "At least compared to me. Though I'm surprised, because there are a lot of them."

I still couldn't See them, or smell them. "Where?" I asked.

She smiled coyly. "You mean you don't know? Behind us, but I think they're running."

"Izak," I whispered, causing the demon to stop walking and face me. I pointed back the way we had come. "Lylyx smells uglies, coming this way."

It was only another heartbeat or two before I Saw them, a mass of heat spread down the smaller sewer tunnel. They were definitely running, and fast. Izak grabbed my shoulder. I turned back to look at him.

His arms swung wildly back and forth, and his eyes were wide. He pointed down the tunnel, and then swung his hand back around to point the way we had been going. I shrugged and held my hands out to the side, not able to understand what he was trying to say. After a couple of rounds of this, he growled in exasperation, dug his claws into my arm, and threw me away from the oncoming nightstalkers. He took hold of Lylyx's wrist before she could pull it away, and dragged her after me.

We were running away from the nightstalkers. I didn't know why, because I was certain the three of us could have dealt with them without difficulty. Judging by the focused look of disturbance on Izak's face, I was getting the feeling there was more to the story, something I hadn't caught on to. The fact that it was causing the fiend to run was enough reason to obey.

The stone was a blur, the constant sound of our footfalls kicking up water echoing around us, trapped and reverberated by the

enclosed space. I could smell the nightstalkers now, getting closer even with our all-out run. I could smell their fear. They weren't coming to attack us, they were running away from something else. We just happened to be in the way.

We reached a break in the tunnel, where it split off on either side. I knew from Josette's memory that we should have continued straight. Instead, I hit the brakes, swerving to the left, and then reaching out and taking hold of both Izak and Lylyx, pulling them in after me.

"We can't outrun them," I said. "With any luck, they'll go right by." Izak didn't look convinced, and Lylyx looked nervous. "Just be ready."

They came on in a pounding flood, two dozen at least, all herded and stampeding in front of some unseen menace. I tried to See it, tried to smell it, but there was nothing. The only sign that the nightstalkers weren't all hallucinating was that same thick feeling of darkness that had made me desire some light. It was evil and empty, and growing heavier by the second.

"What the hell is it?" I whispered to Izak.

His eyes were aflame, and filled with concern. He pointed to his dancing fire, and then clenched his fist and crushed it out of existence. He pointed at his eyes, and did the same. Then he really unnerved me, when he pointed at the pit of his stomach, the general area where I felt my soul rested, and crushed it too.

We waited for the nightstalkers to arrive. We waited for them to make their rush past. We waited for the sounds of screaming, or pain, or fear, or something. We waited to put our eyes on whatever this creature was that was chasing them.

I kept my Sight focused; the demons should have been here by now, but instead they had stopped running, and they turned and moved in total confusion. One by one, their Divine souls began to vanish.

"They can't see," I said to Izak.

He nodded.

I understood why he had run. I understood we were still too exposed. I understood that whatever this thing was, it didn't matter how strong we were. If we couldn't see it, couldn't See it, couldn't smell it, couldn't touch it, we were dead.

I Saw the last nightstalker vanish, leaving my Sight as blind and useless as my eyes suddenly felt. The darkness was increasing, the

hopelessness and despair ratcheting up in intensity. It was coming.

I looked down the tunnel, losing it in the dark distance. I turned back the other way, and saw no escape.

"We have to get to the rift ahead of it," I said. There was no other way.

We started running. I took the lead, letting Josette's memories guide me, following the twisted path through the sewers that she had taken in pursuit of her brother hundreds of years before. The darkness responded to us, the pressure of it nearly overwhelming as it reached out, an invisible but absolute thing.

Still we raced on. I could focus and make myself faster, could add a new dimension of quickness, but it was a feat neither Izak nor Lylyx could match. Maybe I could get away, but I wasn't about to leave either one of them behind. The entity that was chasing us was still gaining, and we were still too far away. We weren't going to get to the rift ahead of it.

I stopped running again, hopping up and turning over to walk back along the ceiling. "Keep running," I said. "I'll catch up."

Izak didn't slow. Lylyx tried, but the demon took hold of her again and forced her to keep moving. With my momentum lost, gravity pulled me back down off the top of the sewer, and I rotated to land on my feet. I focused on the water below me, pushing it back, bunching it up, raising it higher and higher.

Pitch-black tendrils began snaking overhead, and the feeling of death and loss was unlike anything I had ever experienced. My whole body went cold, and I could feel Josette and Ulnyx both withdraw from my consciousness, the power of the oncoming demon forcing them back. Still I pushed the water, leaving the area around me dry while I created a wall of liquid.

I didn't really know what I was doing. I didn't know if it would slow our assailant in the slightest. The pressure was becoming overwhelming, and I dropped to a knee while my body shook from the intensity. It couldn't have been too far away from me now, and I looked forward, expecting to see its physical shape materialize through the water at any moment.

I didn't have to wait long. The darkness was everywhere now, and my eyes were barely good enough to see. It had no real shape, though the form was vaguely humanoid. It had no mass, but instead was like a thick vapor of nothingness. It pushed its way into the wall of water without hesitation, and it was clear that it could move

through the liquid without effect. My entire body was rocking uncontrollably, my soul crying out in fear. It was all I could do to stay present, and to find my focus. It was coming, and I wasn't sure I could stop it.

I cried out as I forced my will on the wall of water, demanding it to harden, for the molecules to pull together in crystalline form, for it to turn into ice. I felt the tug in my mind that told me the universe was bending to my demand, and I watched the water freeze.

A high-pitched shriek echoed through the sewer, and my body immediately stopped shaking, the darkness pulling back and gray clarity returning to my world. I saw the black form in the ice, the edges feathering and coalescing, reaching out and snaking through the barrier. I had succeeded in slowing it, nothing more.

I took off down the tunnel at a dead run, finding a new strength in the escape from the cold grasp of the monster. My feet pounded the stone in a quick cadence, and I focused on the water beneath them when I passed, lifting it and pushing it, piling it up to create a series of walls behind me. It was enough to stop the creature for a few seconds each, but right now every second counted.

I found them waiting outside the room of skulls and bones. Izak was standing in the corridor with his back to me, preventing Lylyx from getting past him to attempt a rescue. I was impressed by the were's loyalty, even though I knew it was more for Ulnyx than it was for me. I had no doubt she was still harboring the hope that she could extract his soul from mine.

"Landon," she cried, seeing me appear behind the fiend. Izak turned, quickly masking a look of surprise at my return. She took advantage of the distraction, ducking past the demon and throwing herself into me, wrapping her arms around me and nuzzling my neck.

"Okay, okay," I said, untangling myself from her. "I slowed it down a bit, but we have to get going."

Izak motioned with his arm, ushering us into the final room before the rift. It was almost just as Josette had remembered it, with one major difference.

Standing in the center of the room was a large wooden crucifix. From it hung an angel, an old, gray angel, wings spread and nailed to the ends of the cross, hands stretched above his head, body gaunt and unclothed. His head hung limply to his chest, but it rose as we

approached.

“Demons,” he said, in a quiet, hollow voice. “Have you come to die?”

“You’re the only one who looks like they’re going to die,” Lylyx said.

His laugh was a wheeze and a cough. “You truly think that, do you were?” he asked. “I don’t know how you got past it, but it will be along for you soon. Whatever you’re doing here, you should never have come.”

“Get past what?” I asked.

His eyes fell on mine, and narrowed. “A diuscrucis?” he said, alarmed. “So she wasn’t lying.”

“Who?”

The angel looked up at his bonds, then over to his wings. “Release me, diuscrucis, and I’ll tell you a tale. When it’s done, all that I ask is that you set my soul free from this prison.”

“You want me to kill you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “But I beseech you to allow my soul to travel to whatever waits beyond.”

I nodded, focusing on the nails that held the angel in place and pulling them from the cross. He would have tumbled to the ground, but Lylyx caught him and lowered him to the floor. The angel took a deep breath and fluttered his wings. Once he was off the cross, I could see the blade that had been affixed to the post, stabbing into his spine and preventing him from escaping his torture.

“Do not underestimate the kindness you have done me,” the angel said to Lylyx. She looked surprised, and stepped back away from him.

“Speak quickly seraph,” I said. “As you’ve said, the demon that hunts in these sewers won’t be trapped forever.”

“Of course,” the angel replied. “I am Archangel Avriel.”

My head nearly burst from the power of Josette’s voice in my soul. “*Avriel the Just* ,” she said with a mixture of joy and sadness.

“I was ordained by Michael himself shortly after the death of Jesus,” he said. “During my years among the living, I was a simple farmer, a layman, known among my peers for my honor and integrity. My sense of justice.” His voice strengthened as he spoke, and the years began to roll off, his body finally able to regenerate. Just how long had he been hanging on that cross?

“I found even greater justice in death, volunteering into the

Lord's Holy War against the First Fallen's mischief on mankind. As a shepherd of the Lord I was offered the chance to protect the meek, and in time rose to be the greatest seraphim walking the mortal plane. In those days, there were few diuscrucis, and those that walked the Earth were direct descendants, hated by both demon and angel, ostracized and killed when possible."

Avriel had finished healing, and now stood up straight and proud, his seven foot frame rippling with muscle and power. His gray wings had regenerated to a healthy silken white, with golden tips. He wrapped the wings around his front to cover his nakedness.

"So it was that the balance was maintained only through the opposing efforts of both Heaven and Hell, and it was common for the archangels to walk the Earth in response to the growing demon threat. We were the most skilled fighters, the best engineers, the strongest in holy scripture. For many years, we kept them at bay, until we no longer could.

"One day, a blight appeared on the mortal realm that threatened to destroy the balance, to end the reign of humanity and deny the Lord his rightful victory. It was a cold darkness that stretched across the land, bringing hopelessness and death to all that it touched. It was the First Fallen's greatest creation, culled from the anguish of his many thousands of prisoners. Its name was Abaddon."

"*Abaddon* ," Josette cried out. The strength of her fear burst into my head, and I closed my eyes and clutched at my temples.

"Abaddon is a myth," I said, Josette's thoughts reflected in my speech.

Avriel approached me, spreading his wings and wrapping me in them. He lowered his face so it was only inches from my own. "You've taken an angel?" he asked, boring his eyes into mine.

I felt Josette within me, being pulled to the surface by his gaze.

"Not taken," she said through my voice. "Offered."

His eyes softened. "*Why?* " he asked, his unspoken word resonating in my mind.

"A new blight is threatening," Josette said. "The demons move against the diuscrucis. We are not strong enough. If he is removed, we will lose."

Avriel nodded, and looked up at the entrance to the room. "It is almost through your barriers," he said. "Abaddon is no myth. It is the deepest heart of Hell's despair, and it once walked this Earth, destroying all that it touched. Angel, demon, human, animal, plant,

it makes no difference. It exists to feed.

"Thousands were killed in its blights, and countless more would have died had we not engineered the creature's doom. A box of my own design, covered in seraphim runes and imbued by all of the disciples. I alone was charged with bringing the box to Abaddon. I alone was charged with approaching the demon, having developed the mental strength needed to combat its message of fear and death. I succeeded in my conquest, and caught the monster in the box, but not without cost. I too was trapped by my design, and spent countless hundreds of years in a war that could not end. We have destroyed one another more times than can be known, but the power of the box is such to repeat the cycle of time, and so we did."

I could feel the blackness begin to creep in. It was taking its time to reach us, unhurried in its confidence. Avriel sensed it too, and he stepped over to the doorway and scratched out holy scripture into the stone floor. As he completed the characters, it took on a soft golden glow.

"That will give me time to finish my story," he said, turning back to us and continuing. "I don't know how long we were inside. I couldn't know what happened to the box, for it would have fallen in the center of the demon's desolation, left lying on the naked ground to be discovered by anyone, or anything. Time passed, impossible to track in the prison of my own making.

"Then one day, it destroyed me. I would have expected to return to my place inside the box, waiting for the demon to find me again, but instead woke here, nailed to this cross, with Abaddon standing before me, no longer contained. For the first time ever, it spoke to me.

"'*You are mine at last* ,' it said. '*You can never escape, and I will delight in the years of despair you will feel from my hand, in payment for the years of despair I have felt chained inside your device* .'"

The darkness couldn't pierce the archangel's scripture, but there was a shriek from the other side of the doorway, and when I looked up it was standing there, its vague, black, humanoid form shifting and moving while it tested Avriel's defenses. It didn't sound happy that he was off the cross.

"The demon remains here to torture me," Avriel said. "Each day it forces itself into my soul, and I suffer a fate I would wish on no one. We are bound by the power that returned us from my prison, the power of the Demon Queen. Once I am gone, it won't be able to

survive here, and it will retreat to Hell."

"The Demon Queen?" I asked. "She was here?"

"I do not know," Avriel replied. "Abaddon has told me she is the one who set us free, and nailed me to the crucifix."

There was a hissing sound, and when I looked back I could see that Abaddon was defeating the archangel's runes, black tendrils smothering them and erasing them from the stone. I felt the cold despair returning, and I knew our time was up.

"Destroy me now, diuscrucis," Avriel said. "For all our sakes."

I looked at him, and then back at the demon. "If I kill you, Abaddon will be returned to Hell?"

"Yes," he said. He began to grow agitated.

"If he's returned to Hell, he can be brought back to the mortal realm, untethered by your bond," I said. "Do you have any idea what that could mean?"

The glow of the runes began to flicker, and more of the demon's power began to ooze into the room. The hellfire sconces started going out, one by one. Avriel's eyes grew wide, and he grabbed my shoulder.

"Please," he said. "You made a promise."

We were out of time. I took hold of Ulnyx's power and used it to create a single sharp claw. All I needed to do was break the skin.

"Hurry," Avriel cried, spreading his wings wide and holding out his arms to give me a clear opening.

I focused, pulling on the air, creating a massive gust that lifted the archangel. It threw him backward, returning him to his place of impalement on the cross. I located the nails lying on the ground and pulled them up, pinning his wings and hands anew, leaving him in tears.

"You promised," he cried, his voice soft, hoarse, and filled with despair.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I meant it. I reached out and took Lylyx by the arm, pulling her with me towards the open mouth of the giant demon skull. Izak was already in the tunnel, running for the rift.

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“Light it up,” I said to Izak as soon as we reached the end of the short tunnel. I had half-expected that Charis would have destroyed the rift, and left us to be devoured by Abaddon. Then again, I had a sneaking suspicion that freeing the demon was precisely what the Demon Queen had hoped I would do.

Izak knelt at the rift and began tracing over the existing runes, making a series of harsh guttural sounds in the back of his throat. Cries of extraordinary agony echoed through the tunnel; the demon extracting payment for Avriel’s defiance. I cringed with every terrible vocalization, trying to ignore the guilt I was feeling for leaving the archangel in such a state.

The circular set of runes began to flame, and I felt a slight charge of ionized air fill the space. Izak stepped back from the transport rift and motioned me towards it.

“Be ready,” I said. There was no telling what might greet us on the other side.

Lylyx reached out and took hold of my arm. “These things always make me a little dizzy,” she said.

I gave a slight nod, and stepped into the rift.

I had only been through a rift one other time since I had visited the Demon Queen and retrieved the Grail. I was chasing a fiend through the streets of Manhattan when he ducked down an alley and into an old, abandoned bar. I followed him into the bathroom, and after shoving my way through the door had found myself in a different abandoned pub in Dublin, Ireland. In the end, I had caught and killed the fiend, and destroyed both ends of the rift. They didn't make me dizzy, but I hated not knowing what I was walking into.

I was expecting a well-laid trap, or at the very least a poorly laid trap. I thought maybe Charis would be there on the other side, as she had those years before, waiting to gloat and tell me again what a fool I was. I considered that Gervais would be there, his own power brought to bear, ready to strike me down before I could gather my wits.

None of that happened. One foot left the rift while the other one entered, and on the other side there was nothing. No Charis, no Gervais, no Sarah, no minions or underlings. Nothing. I had made every effort not to be taken by surprise, and instead I was taken by surprise. I stood there in shock long enough for Izak to bump me on his way through.

He stumbled to a stop, looking as confused as I imagined I did. Lylyx seemed out of sorts as well, but that may have been her reaction to the travel.

"Not what I expected," I said. We were in a simple twelve-foot square room with the rift in the center, an open doorway beyond. I focused on my Sight, reaching out for a sign of an ambush, or at least an indication that there was anyone home. Nothing but nothing. My heart sank. Where was Sarah?

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Lylyx asked, recovering from her disorientation. She dropped my arm and used it to point at Izak. "Are you sure you can trust this one?"

The demon ruffled at her suggestion, rounding on her with flames in his eyes. I stepped between them.

"I trust Izak more than I trust you," I said. I turned to the fiend. "We're in the right place, aren't we?"

Izak nodded, waving at the room and giving me the thumbs up. This was where he had planned for us to be.

"Okay," I said. "We'll take a look around, and see if we can figure out what's going on." Mr. Ross had said Gervais returned to

Paris. Sarah had to be here. “Keep your guard up, they may be able to hide themselves from Sight.”

I started towards the door, but Izak put his hand on my shoulder. When I turned back, he pointed at his chest. The brand. He motioned at the floor, and then took a seat.

“What are you doing?” Lylyx asked.

“He has to stay here,” I said. “Gervais is his master. He’s been branded.”

Lylyx’s face softened. “How?” she asked quietly.

Izak glanced up at her, and then turned away, embarrassed.

“Leave him be,” I told her. “It’s none of our business. Let’s go.”

We headed out of the room, finding ourselves in a long, straight stone corridor that didn’t appear all that different from the sewer we had just escaped. There were a few doors spaced along either side of the hallway, but opening them showed the rooms to be no more than standard household storage – cleaning supplies, sacks of grain, tack for horses, and anything else a rich French noble might need to enjoy the comfort of his chateau.

The end of the corridor brought us to a small, open room that split at a pair of narrow stairways headed in opposite directions.

“Up or down?” Lylyx asked. I closed my eyes and focused my Sight, but still there was nothing.

“*Which way* ?” I asked, reaching out for Josette. I knew she could hear me, but her response couldn’t pierce the solitude. I wanted to search her memories, but the idea scared me. Here of all places, I had no idea what I would find, what I would experience, or what it would do to me.

We had determined it was my power, my connection to Purgatory that was obscuring our ability to communicate. It was a river of energy that couldn’t be easily crossed. She had done it on occasion, with help or in moments of strong emotion, and I could always feel both her and Ulnyx’s pulse running just below the surface, fluctuating in and out of reach. It was clear that the key to letting her through was to stifle the connection, to put a finger in the dam, but I had no idea how, at least not consciously. All of my efforts up to now had been to learn to amplify the signal, not suppress it.

I opened my eyes and considered the steps. The chateau was huge, at least forty rooms, and that was only the upper floors. I knew Gervais had also built a laboratory somewhere underground,

as well as a prison. What else had he constructed beneath the surface that I didn't know about, but maybe Josette did? I could have used her help.

"Down," I said at last. It was the lab that decided it for me. Just the tiniest sliver of a thought that Sarah could be down there was enough to turn me cold.

We descended the stairs, following three narrow flights into the bowels of the chateau. Still, the estate seemed deserted.

The steps finally fed out into a large, unlit corridor that I recognized immediately as the prison. Rows of cells lined the passage, and I stopped to take note of the runes that covered each individual bar. This wasn't an ordinary dungeon. These were cells designed to hold demons.

All except the last one. The last one had runes too, but they were different. The entire hollow was different. It was three times the size of the others, with a soft pillow-top mattress in the corner, along with a recliner, end table, lamp, and a shelf full of books. It was warmly decorated, and strangely homey. I lost myself at the sight of it.

* * *

The demon looks in at me with inquisitive eyes. I've seen this one before, I know, trailing along behind Gervais, attending to his needs. I remember chasing him outside of Notre Dame, only to have him vanish around a corner like no more than a ghost.

Izak. That's what Gervais calls him, but when I hear my brother's voice echo through the dungeon I see the demon bristle, and I know that isn't his true name. Why does he call him that, I wonder? Does it have meaning, or is the moniker a flaunt? I can see the runes on the fiend's arms, and I know he has power of his own.

He's standing there, looking at me, his hands wrapped around the bars that bind me to this place, preventing me from returning to Heaven. He's been coming around more often lately, and staying longer to stare at me.

"Good morning Izak," I say. I began speaking to him a few weeks ago out of boredom and loneliness. He doesn't bristle when I say the name anymore. When I say it, he almost looks pleased. "Have you come to check on Sarah?"

He never speaks back, either with his eyes or his hands. I know he

cannot use his voice, because he has no tongue. It was taken long enough ago that he doesn't try.

I put my hand to my stomach, feeling the small bump of it. So much fear at the truth of the pregnancy, but I am a servant of the Lord, and the Lord has seen fit to bless me with this child. She is innocent of the crimes of her father. She is innocent of her heritage. I know the others would disagree, but it is my right to believe in a just, kind, and merciful Lord. It is my right to believe He has a plan for Sarah, or she would not be developing in my womb, the first diuscrucis born in nearly two millennia.

The demon is still standing there, staring at me. He looks sad.

"Why don't you come in?" I offer. "It's early, and I'm sure your master is still in bed."

His eyes widen at the suggestion, and he moves to leave, but then hesitates. He looks at me for another minute or so, and then cautiously unlocks and opens the door. His eyes stay glued to me while he enters and locks the cage behind him.

"The Lord has said that the fallen cannot be redeemed," I say, "for hate that has grown in the heart of an angel is hate that cannot be undone."

He walks over to where I am resting on the recliner and kneels down in front of me. I reach out and put my hand on his forehead. He jerks backward, frightened, and then leans back in. His brow is tinder.

"You aren't fallen, Izak," I say. "The Lord will forgive you, if you but ask." I am Calming him, but he is letting me. My ability pales in comparison to his strength.

Tears run from the demon's eyes, and he shakes his head in disbelief over the Lord's forgiveness. I take his head and rest it on my lap, singing softly to him. In minutes, he is at rest. I could take the keys and make my escape, but I remain. I will not turn this creature away from the redemption he so desperately needs. The Lord will decide my fate.

* * *

"Landon?"

My vision returned. Lylyx was there, holding me up from behind while I clutched at the bars to Josette's former prison. I should have seen that one coming.

"I'm okay," I said, rebalancing on my feet and removing my hands from the bars. There were imprints in the skin where the

edges of the runes had dug in. I studied them for the few seconds it took my body to repair.

"That's the second time you've gone dark on me," she said, letting me go and backing up a step.

"Have you ever absorbed a soul?" I asked her.

"Not yet," she replied. "What's it like?"

"When you absorb a soul, it becomes a part of you, but it still retains its own sense of itself, its own memories. Ulnyx can see everything I can see, he feels my pain when I'm hurt, and I feel his…uh… happiness, when I look at you. It's a lot more symbiotic than I expected." Five years, and I was only now beginning to reach any true understanding of it. "Different things trigger different memories, and sometimes they're overwhelming."

I shouldn't have mentioned feeling what Ulnyx felt. No sooner had I stopped talking than Lylyx's arms were back around me, and her mouth was pressed against mine. I could feel Ulnyx pushing inside me, practically begging me to return the affection. At that moment, I understood that even the most vile of the First Fallen's children was not immune to love. I opened my mouth and returned the kiss, giving the experience up to Ulnyx in payment for his advice. One kiss, and one kiss only. That was the remainder on the balance.

"Don't get the wrong idea," I said to her, breaking the embrace. "That wasn't from me."

Her smile was lustful. "Tell me there was no part of you that didn't enjoy it," she replied.

It was a small part. "Come on," I said, leading her past the prison cells and into a small antechamber. I focused on my Sight again, and started to run.

It was faint, but it was there, the smallest trace of heat, the barest sign of life. It could have been anyone, or anything, the signal was just too slight to know, but even the thinnest hope was better than none at all.

The antechamber fed into a separate large room that reminded me of my own place at the Belmont; a wide open space, a rack of various weapons, stuffed practice targets, and singed walls. I noted the piles of ash as we sped by. They could have been incinerated dummies, or they could have been the remains of Divine.

The training room exited into another, more gruesome space, most easily described as a torture chamber. I only recognized a few

of the evil tools, the most popular standards of the middle ages. An iron maiden, a rack, a scavenger's daughter, and a host of other cruel devices lay in haphazard order about the space. They all had some measure of staining from the blood of their victims, though the judas chair appeared to be one of Gervais' favorites. At the end of the room was a metal door, covered in demonic runes that had been painted with blood. Whatever I was chasing, it was behind that door.

I focused my will on it, demanding the bolts to corrode and dissolve, insisting that it crumble and fall to the floor. I watched the runes begin to glow, and felt the feedback building.

"Get down," I shouted, turning my energy to myself instead, using the power to leap towards Lylyx, grabbing her and throwing us both aside as a gout of hellfire launched from the door.

We hit the wall hard, and I heard Lylyx's back crack under the pressure. She hissed in pain and lashed out, catching my shoulder with her fist and rocking me off of her. I prepared to defend myself from her rage, but she wasn't even looking at me.

She got to her feet, growling and shifting, her body growing, changing, healing. With a roar, she rushed over to the door and began kicking it. "Son of a bitch," she howled, each blow leaving a deeper dent in the metal.

I got over my initial stasis and joined her, pulling on Ulnyx's power and using it to become the monster. We hammered at the door together, using brute force when Divine energy wouldn't do. A dozen smites later, the iron flew off its hinges, headed into the room. I focused, pulling in the air behind it, giving it an unnatural density, stopping the bullet before it could hit anything that might be important.

"Nice catch," Lylyx said, returning to her human form. I shifted back as well.

We had smashed our way into the archfiend's lab. Computers ringed the perimeter, interspersed with all kinds of medical equipment and paraphernalia that I couldn't name or understand the use of. Near the rear of the room were a couple of gurneys, and one of them had a corpse on it. The corpse wasn't what I was Seeing.

That was in the center of the room, not ten feet from where the door had come to rest. He was hanging from a chain that had been bolted to the ceiling, his arms bound above his head, his legs

swinging freely a foot above the ground. A dagger was sticking out of his chest, dug straight into his heart. It was a cursed blade, so it hadn't killed him. Instead, it was keeping him incapacitated and weak, unable to die, but also unable to heal.

His head lifted slowly, and looked unsteady at the end of his neck. A curl of black hair rested over his right eye, or rather what had once been his right eye, which had been gouged out. In a surely-not-coincidental irony, so had his left. It must have been done by a demon's claw, because that was the only way it wouldn't have healed.

"Gervais," I said. "Where the hell is Sarah?"

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So many memories. So much pain. In that moment, I didn't suffer one specific flashback, or fall into a single dark hole of Josette's past. In that moment, I went headfirst into a pool of blackness and hurt that was beyond compare. Every memory of the archfiend's torture and betrayal ripped through me, a terrifying primal scream that ran through me like a nuclear blast. I crumpled to the floor, putting my head in my hands, trying to resolve the emotions. The destruction was physical, spiritual, and mental. It was beyond intense, and it felt like it lasted forever.

Behind me, I could hear Lylyx calling my name. In front of me, I could hear Gervais struggling to breathe, trying to speak, or laugh, or gloat. I swam through the maelstrom, my anger building. One thought, a memory of my own. Josette trapped under the weight of the angel Moses, struggling for survival, the elder seraph chiding her for her brother's evil deeds. In that moment, her anger and guilt and pain had driven her to become nothing more than an object of rage, a broken visage of goodness that had brought her to violence and caused her to fall. I didn't have to worry about falling.

The tidal wave pushed me to my feet, and the dagger in Gervais' chest came to my hand with barely a thought. The scream that left my lips was inhuman and cold, more feral and raw than any demon could manage. I wanted to stab, and cut, and tear, and rip, and continue to plunge the blade into the archfiend over, and over, and over again. I wanted revenge, penance, balance. I wanted to put a bloody, agonizing end to the evil creature before me, and I wanted to do it slowly.

I stepped forward and raised the knife, ready to extract my payment, when I was hit from inside for a second time.

"*Landon, no* ," Josette cried, her own shout rising over my turmoil, overwhelming my anger, and breaking my momentum. "*This is not the way.* "

The knife clattered to the floor, and I stood transfixed, staring at Gervais but not seeing him. The chaos of my soul began to quiet, and reason began to filter back in. Sarah. I couldn't help Sarah if Gervais were dead. He was the only one who knew where she was. My body shook at the thought of how close I had come to complete failure. I *was* a fool.

"Diuscrucis," the archfiend said. The hole in his heart had closed over, and his breathing was returning to normal. Still, he didn't attempt to remove himself from his chains.

Josette was a bastion of peace in my soul, sending me soothing thoughts, stealing away the anger that remained. I looked up at the demon.

"Gervais," I repeated, my voice more powerful in its newfound calm. "Where is Sarah?"

He spoke in a soft French accent, his voice smooth and confident despite his situation. "Of course, she told me you would come for her. She told me you would be angry." His head shifted forward, as though he were focusing. "She left me here as a gift to you. She said you would appreciate the state she left me in, before you killed me. Oh, but I knew. I knew my dearest sister wouldn't let me down."

My anger was rekindling, but as quickly as it could rise, Josette's soul tempered it. "Who told you?" I asked.

His smile was mocking. "That vampire bitch of yours. Reyka."

"Rebecca?"

My heart skipped, but I held onto my center. Rebecca? Back in the mortal realm, back from Hell?

"She's used that name before," he said.

My mind began to spin with the possibilities. She was back, and she had taken Sarah from Gervais, leaving the archfiend incapacitated for me to find. I wanted to believe she had returned to help me with whatever was happening, whatever plot the Demon Queen had cooked up for me to fall into. I wanted to think that she had been on my side the entire time, and that the last five years had all been for some esoteric purpose whose meaning I would discover once we were reunited.

I wanted to believe in the dream, but the fact was that I couldn't. I had heard her lie when she left me paralyzed on the floor. I had seen in her eyes that she knew exactly what she was doing. Why would she have done that if she really had cared. Survival, she had said. Survival was about doing whatever it took. Survival didn't leave room for friends.

"She's no friend of mine," I said. It was a hard thing to let out, because I had avoided it for so long. Still, I couldn't stop that small piece of myself that remained naive from holding on just a little bit. "Tell me what happened."

The smile remained, and he shook his hands in their shackles. "I'll tell you everything, mon ami, but I have terms."

Of course. No demon would trade something for nothing. "You aren't exactly in a strong bargaining position," I said. "All I have to do is stick this dagger back into whatever passes as your heart." I focused, bringing the blade up so that the point bit into his chest.

"I beg to differ," he countered. "I've already lost my eyes, and I know you won't kill me. Sweet Josette protects me still. What is it they say about family? The family that lays together, stays together." He paused, allowing the words time to cut. I didn't give him the satisfaction. "No matter," he said. "You need me to tell you where my beloved child has been abducted to. I need nothing from you. I can hang here for a thousand years, someone will be along sooner or later."

"If Rebecca has Sarah, I think I already know where to find them," I said. Where else would she go? "Which leaves you nothing to bargain with, except your life."

"Can you be sure?" he asked me. "Are you willing to risk Sarah's life on what you believe of this creature you say isn't your friend? I have seen her. I wouldn't, if I were in your position."

What did that mean? Rebecca had spent the last five years in Hell. Who could know how she had changed? What I knew for sure

was that the Demon Queen was moving against me, and she had employed no shortage of powerful demons to hinder my progress in getting here. Were Charis and Rebecca working together? Or did Charis seek to delay me because she knew Gervais had lost Sarah? In either case, what did they want with her in the first place? Too many questions, and no answers. The archfiend could help me with at least one of them.

I plunged the dagger back into his heart. “I’m done playing games with demons,” I said.

He laughed. “You think this is pain?” he asked with his last strong breath.

“No,” I replied. “That’s just to keep you still for a minute.” I walked over to him and tore open his shirt.

His chest was covered in dozens of runed scars, swirls, sigils, pentagrams and crossing lines. It took me a few minutes to find it, and I could feel the demon’s ragged breath on my scalp the entire time.

“What are you looking for?” he whispered. His voice hinted at fear.

I reached up and pulled the dagger out of his heart with my hand, leading him to take in a big gulp of air.

“Don’t worry, I found it,” I said.

The one I wanted was on his right pectoral, and I didn’t hesitate to sink the dagger into his flesh and cut it cleanly away.

“What are you doing?” he cried, watching the formerly scarred skin regrow clean. Somewhere in the distance, a shout echoed through the stone.

“It’s clear you don’t fear me,” I said, stepping back away from him. “That’s okay. I don’t need you to fear me.”

I looked over at Lylyx. She was grinning widely, understanding what I had just done. “You should have just told him,” she said to Gervais.

A strange coldness that brought back the recent memory of Abaddon preceded Izak’s entrance into the lab. The moment Gervais Saw him, he began to wriggle in his chains.

“What did you do?” he shouted, his fear now plain.

Izak looked at me, and then at the archfiend’s chest, smooth where the scars of the binding had once been. The fiend’s shirt was hanging open, his chest bleeding where he had mutilated his skin to remove the other end of the connection. He approached us, his eyes

alight in anger. I raised my hand, putting it between the two of them.

"Not yet," I said to Izak. "I need to know what he knows. Keep him alive. For Sarah."

Izak didn't look happy, but he nodded. A small ball of fire formed in the palm of his hand, and he held it up to Gervais' face. The archfiend tried to move away from it, but the chains kept him static.

"Tell me what you know," I said. "I can't be sure how long Izak can control himself after what you did to him."

Gervais growled. "Fine," he said. "I'll tell you everything, if you get him away from me and let me go."

"Deal," I said. "Izak?"

The fiend punched Gervais in the gut, sending him swinging on the chains, but he retreated.

"Of course," he began, once he had stopped swinging. "I've been looking for Sarah for years. Ever since Izak stole her away. I combed the world in search of her, offering up everything I have at my disposal. Money, sex, power, information… nobody knew anything, or if they did, they were afraid to get caught between he and me. As you may have surmised, this one is quite a devilish fiend."

And Izak wasn't his original name.

"Sixteen years," he continued. "A blink in time under normal circumstances, but Sarah is mortal. Her time here is limited, and there is no chance that the powers-that-be in the other realms will ever allow her to return. I was becoming desperate, and I am ashamed to admit, losing hope. You have no idea of what she is capable of. What she can become with the proper…education.

"She came to me two months ago, your little vampiress non-friend. I could feel the power radiating off of her the moment she stepped through the transport rift. Whatever you think she was before, think again diuscrucis. She's been to Hell, and something happened to her there."

My mind kept returning to the last vision I had of her before she disappeared into the Hell rift. Sad, but strong. Sure of her decision.

"What did she want?" I asked.

"She told me she would help me, if I would help her. She said she knew where Sarah was. I asked her what she wanted in return, and I offered her everything. She settled for my loyalty, and

allegiance. It was a steep price, but such is the nature of my desire that I agreed. In any case, allegiance among demons is a fickle thing." He laughed then, a self-defeated chuckle.

"She gave me the means to hide myself from Divine Sight, runes she etched into my back with her claws. She brought me to New York, and showed me how Sarah was living. I watched her walk to school, and I was disgusted. She's wasting her life as a simple mortal when she should be Commanding them like a God." His voice rose to a shout, and his body trembled with anger. "I would have taken her then, right out in the open, but Reyka forbid it. She insisted I had to wait, that it was not yet time. I was a fool. She wanted you to know she was taken. She wanted you to know that it was me. She wanted you to come here, because she wanted you to find me like this. I didn't see her lies until it was too late.

"I found Sarah in her city below the surface, living like a vagabond instead of the princess that she is. She didn't know me, because she couldn't See me. She tried to call for help. I could feel her power reaching out, but I put her to sleep, prepared the rift to summon the wraith, and left. Izak was supposed to be killed. That bitch assured me that Izak would be killed." He started screaming again, shaking on his chains. The anger left as quickly as it had come, and he hung still again.

"Just another deception," he said, his calm and anger exchanging like the tide. "She's quite good at the game. Sarah knew her as soon as we returned here. She asked her if it was time."

Gervais paused and sat motionless on the end of the chain, deep in thought. "Why would she say that?" he asked in a whisper before continuing his tale.

"'Almost,' Reyka had said to her. 'You're safe now.' And then the bitch put her vampires on me."

"You got beat by vampires?" I asked, confused. In the earth-walking demonic food chain, Gervais was near the top, while vampires were close to the bottom.

"Really stretching your head muscles on that one, aren't you diuscrucis," he spat. "She's done something to them. They're stronger and heal faster than any demon I've ever seen. They even healed from my fire."

I was ready to fire back on the first comment, but the second stopped me dead. I couldn't be sure, but I had a feeling I knew what she had done. The Grail, my blood, her blood. It made me sick to

my stomach.

"I couldn't defeat them," he said. "Not without risking Sarah and bringing the entire chateau down on us. They chained me up, and Reyka stuck the dagger in my heart. She didn't want my allegiance. She wanted to give you a gift, an apology of sorts. She said to tell you that Sarah is safe in her care and that she's waiting for you."

"Where?" I asked.

"Las Lajas Cathedral," he said. "South America."

He was lying. "Izak," I said, turning to the fiend. "Your former master thinks he can lie to me."

Izak clenched his fist, and it lit up in flame.

"Wait," Gervais cried. "I swear that's where she said she would be." Truth. "I don't believe her." Truth.

I paused Izak. "Why don't you believe her?" I asked.

"Do you know what would happen if she tried to hang out inside a church?" Gervais asked. "She'd be surrounded by angels within thirty seconds, and cathedrals have power of their own. She may be strong, but she isn't that strong."

"Even with an army of super vampires?"

Gervais fell silent. "Sarah," he said finally.

"What about her?" I asked.

"Look at my eyes, diuscrucis," he said.

"Rebecca took them," I replied. "You deserved it."

Gervais laughed. "Reyka didn't take them. Sarah did."

I felt Josette's fear creep up my soul, where it was added to my own. "Sarah did?" I asked.

Not that it wasn't understandable after what the demon had done to her, but it was still surprising. When I thought of her, I saw only the innocent, frightened girl who had slept by my side and named me protector.

"If she had tortured anyone else the way she did her father, I would have been proud," he said.

I had another thought then. One that was more disconcerting than any other. Gervais had always wanted to raise Sarah to be evil, to tap into her power and use it for his own ends. Josette had believed that getting her away from the archfiend would be her salvation. What if Gervais' influence was unnecessary? What if she was breaking bad on her own? Sarah had tried to Command me. She had sent Izak with me against his will. She had cut out the demon's eyes, and had asked Rebecca if it was time, as though she

were in on whatever was going on.

"Why would Rebecca bring Sarah to Las Lajas?" I asked, gripped with a dread that I couldn't shake.

"If Sarah's power is maturing, she'll be able to Command the seraph. She can make them fall, and she can do it faster than you can balance it. She'll need time though, time to learn to control them. Las Lajas is the sandbox. The Vatican will be the battlefield."

My fear evolved into anger. "Is this what you wanted?" I shouted, walking back over to the demon and planting the dagger deep into his flesh. He didn't react to the wound. "Is this what you raped your sister for? Is this what you imprisoned her for?" I pulled the blade out and stabbed him again, and again. I could sense Josette in the back of my soul, but I still controlled her, and I pushed my power between us.

It was surprising that Izak would be the one to stop my mutilation of the demon. He grabbed me from behind and ripped me away from Gervais, leaving him as a shredded mess, blood streaming to the floor. He immediately began to heal.

"I want power," Gervais said with unaffected calm. "Sarah was to help me control this world, not destroy it. Let Satan have Hell, let God have Heaven, let Dante have Purgatory. Earth could have been mine."

He actually sounded remorseful. It made me sick. Gervais had occupied so much of the pain and anger I had been carrying around for the last five years, his treatment of Josette blasting at me from her memories and my reaction to them. I don't know how many times I had been doubled over by those memories, left leaning or crouching with tears running from my eyes, my heart racing, unable to control myself. He was the boogie man in my nightmares, and like any kid growing up and finding out there were no monsters under the bed, I was discovering that his power was an illusion fed by the very fears that had incapacitated me. Josette's ties to him were too personal to see through the charade, but now that I was looking on him, hanging blind from the ceiling, I almost felt pity. Almost.

"I've told you everything I know," Gervais said. "Now set me free."

"Lylyx," I said, turning back towards the door to the lab, "stay here with Izak. I have to go meet someone." I glanced over at the fiend. "Izak, I'm done. Do whatever you want with him."

Izak smiled. He hadn't pulled me away to stop me. He had pulled me away because he wanted to be the one to destroy the archfiend. I could feel Josette struggling within me, and I begged her for forgiveness. It was the second promise I had broken in less than an hour, but I decided that I could live with that.

I found a Ferrari in the carriage house outside the chateau. I could hear Gervais' screams as I drove away.

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There was a certain comfort to the sooth purr of the Ferrari's engine that helped me keep my mind in some kind of coherent state while I made the much longer mortal trip back to Paris from Gervais' chateau in Besancon, not far from the Swiss border. It was nearly six o'clock France time, and I could only hope that whatever was occurring at the Eiffel Tower today hadn't happened yet. Since I was running under the assumption that the party was in my honor, I was pretty sure that it hadn't.

Of course, it didn't offer me any more clarity. I had spent the last five years fighting every day to keep my emotions in check, to push them down into the recesses of my soul and try to lose them there. It had made my work maintaining the balance almost clinical, an exercise in efficiency. It had led me to scour the world for answers to Charis' riddle, because the unfeeling soul meant an eternity worse than anything Hell could throw at me. In the end, it had cost me Sarah, because I had ignored the warning signs and plodded on my fixated course.

Now? Now it was all coming back in a flood of anger that was

threatening to complete my failure. I had lost Josette and Rebecca that day under the Statue of Liberty, but at least I thought I had won the war for balance. I was beginning to see that I hadn't won anything. At best I had just delayed some schemes for a while, taking the Grail out of the game and causing the forces around me to move on to plan B. The trouble was, I couldn't figure out the game, or even who the players were. Charis was out there, and she had freed the demon Abaddon in Gervais' tunnels. Did the archfiend know about it? In my eagerness to reach Sarah, I hadn't even thought to ask him. She had also sent a witch and Lylyx to slow me down, to keep me from getting to Gervais too soon. Why?

What about Sarah? The fear of her maturation into a powerful diuscrucis who had chosen selfishness and power had been converted and joined with the rest of my anger. If she really had moved in that direction, it was because of what Gervais had dictated she would be. She had grown up in fear and hiding. Suppose she found she had the power to live a different way, to be in control of her own life? Could anyone blame her for using it? How much evil was ingrained by fate, how much by genetics, how much by fear and lack of independence? Her lineage made her the poster child for nature versus nurture, but even there I saw only balance.

Where did Rebecca fit in? She had given Sarah up to Gervais, but then taken her in and left Gervais for me. The archfiend had said it was a gift to me, but why leave me a gift unless she wanted something? What could she possibly want, if she already had Sarah, and with it the means to bring down Heaven? Unless Gervais was wrong, and she had taken Sarah to prevent that very thing. But the demon had said Hell had changed her. I couldn't imagine Hell changing anyone in a good way.

Too many balls in the air, and none of them rotating in a predictable orbit. Trying to catch them all was out of the question, and the powerlessness of that truth fueled my anger even more. Obi had given me the only solid clue I had in anything. A message sent by anonymous, intended to be intercepted and lead me to the Eiffel Tower. I would follow it and let this part of the game play out, and then I would see the truth. Sarah had said it to me plainly the first time we had met - they can't win if you don't play. I wasn't sure I had a choice. I jammed my foot down harder on the accelerator, an angry grimace playing across my face as the car burst forward with

renewed force.

It was just after eight when I eased the Ferrari into a spot on the street across from the Tower. The spot had been a little too small for the car, so I had focused, giving the fore and aft vehicles just enough shove to make room. I changed my appearance before getting out of the car; an older gentleman with salt and pepper hair and a neatly trimmed mustache in an expensive dark suit.

I strolled across the street and along the concourse leading to the Tower, my hands in my pockets and my Sight stretched out into the night. I knew right away that I was in the right place, at the right enough time. There were a lot of Divine here, most of them at the ground level, spread out and stationary. Waiting. For me? Or something else?

There was one up on the Tower, positioned at the second deck, their signature a hot beacon burning into my soul. I felt a familiarity to this one, something about them that I recognized some piece of, but couldn't quite place. I had no doubts they were the one I was here to see. There was no motion from the other Divine, and I wasn't hiding. Play the game, but be ready to change the rules.

"Hello sir," the young French girl at the Tower ticket booth said. She was slender, with long, dark hair, brown eyes, and porcelain skin. A math textbook rested open off to the side of her counter, next to a small computer terminal.

I was pretty sure she was speaking French, but I had quickly learned that Divinity granted the gift of tongues. I heard everything in English, and spoke it that way, at least to my own ears.

"Hello," I replied. "I'm meeting someone up at…" I looked over to the board behind her, where the destinations and ticket prices were listed. "Jules Verne."

She smiled. "Of course, sir. Name?" She put her fingers to the keyboard to type in my response.

Except, I didn't know what to say. I wasn't even sure who I was actually going to be meeting up there. Was it Charis, familiar to my Sight but changed somehow? Was it Rebecca, her identity altered by her trip to Hell? I stood silent, trying to do all of the permutations, to guess the right password and gain access to the Tower's second floor. Not that I needed the permission of the girl in the booth, but I preferred to go in quietly.

"Sir?" she asked.

There was only one name I could be sure of. “Hamilton,” I said.

Her fingers danced along the keys. “Ah, yes sir. Party of two. I see your acquaintance has already arrived. An escort will arrive momentarily to take you up. Enjoy your dinner, sir.”

I stepped off to the side and looked up at the Tower again. My ‘acquaintance’ hadn’t moved. A minute later a tall, handsome man in a tuxedo approached and led me over to the private elevator up to the restaurant.

The Jules Verne was a posh, elegant eatery located on the second floor of the Tower, about four hundred feet above ground level. Of course, it had fantastic views of Paris, and the dark, classy ambiance mixed well with just enough chintz to call out the place as both a fine gourmet treat, and an obvious tourist destination. When the escort dropped me off with a second maitre-de in the restaurant proper, I could see that it was a full house. I imagined it always was.

I didn’t need the waiter to guide me to my table, but I allowed him to. My Sight was red hot now, though I still couldn’t identify who the signature belonged to. Judging by the layout, the table was in the back corner by the window, my line of sight obscured by a support beam. When the waiter pulled me around the obstruction, I smirked.

The man at the seat across from the empty one I took to be mine was a small, lean Asian, with a thick lawn of spiked black hair, a petite, well-defined face, and sharp gray eyes. He was dressed in an expensive suit, a gold Rolex dangling from a narrow wrist. He was playing the part of the businessman perfectly. He smiled and stood at the sight of me, his fangs sliding out to overlap his lower lip.

“Mr. Hamilton,” he said, his voice too deep for his size, but smooth as the silk tie he was wearing.

“Mr… Cho, is it?” I asked, going along with the formalities.

He nodded. “At your service, my friend,” he replied. “Thank you for meeting me here. Please, have a seat.”

I slid into the offered chair, and he returned to his own. “To be honest,” I said. “I was expecting someone else to be here.”

He put up his hand. “Of course. There is much to speak about, my friend. First, a drink? I know it will do nothing for your senses, but some still find the act itself relaxing.”

I thought about Sarah, and Rebecca. No more stalling. “Skip it,” I said. “I don’t have a lot of time to waste on you.”

He laughed. “You have more time than you might think,” he replied. “But as you wish.”

The archvampire put his hands out on the table and lowered his head, his eyes falling closed. I heard a soft hum escaping from his mouth, a hum that began to morph and change in pitch and timbre. An amalgam of coldness and heat pierced the air, and the smell of a familiar perfume mixed with iron and blood. I could sense the tempo of my heart rising, my body reacting to the change faster than my mind could process it. Cho’s eyes opened and his head snapped up, leaving me staring at crisp, blue orbs.

“Rebecca.”

The name fell from my mouth and floated between us. She took a deep breath to suck it in. In that moment everything I had wanted to say scattered with the inhale, and I was left in a new type of purgatory, firmly entrenched between desire and disgust. It didn’t matter that she was using Cho’s body. It was *her* .

Her lips spread into a sensuous smile. “Landon,” she said. “I’ve missed you.”

She wasn’t lying.

“Where is Sarah?” I asked. “Rebecca, if you hurt her…”

The smile vanished. “Hurt her? Why would I hurt her? Be assured worm, I have no intention of harming your sister. She is with me, and she is safe.”

There was nobody else who could make the nickname ‘worm’ sound like a good thing. “I just can’t believe it’s you, that you’re here. After all this time.”

I felt a pinch in my soul, the tiniest little push against me. Ulnyx.

“Did you like my gift?” she asked. “Josette’s brother all tied up? I would have added a bow, but I couldn’t find one large enough to wrap around his ego.”

“It would have been a nice touch,” I replied. “Although I think Sarah appreciated it more than me. So did Izak.”

There was the slightest twist in Rebecca’s expression at the mention of the demon. Another pinch from the Were, sharper this time.

“Gervais’ puppet? He’s with you?” Her eyes danced around the restaurant.

“No. He’s having his way with your gift,” I said. “Rebecca, I’m happy to see you, but I’m having a hard time trying to understand

what the heck is going on."

In fact, it was more than that. A third hit from Ulnyx, and it was like he had cracked a window, an invisible barrier that was up between Rebecca and me. A new distortion spread from the crack, one that was closer to reality. I saw it, but I didn't understand it. Not yet.

"It is a wondrous time for us, Landon," she said. "Not just for you and me, but for all Divine. A new age."

I raised my hand. I could see it through the crack. I could see the veins running along my wrist, the flesh laid over the muscle underneath. I saw past it to Rebecca. Not just Rebecca, but also Cho. There was something there. Something I was forgetting.

"No. Start from the beginning. You bled me out and took a swig from the Grail. You left me paralyzed. Why?"

Her head tilted a fraction. "I did what I had to do," she said. "In that moment, it wasn't about you, other than the blood you carry in your veins. You could have been anyone, and I would have done the same. When a Divine drinks the blood of a diuscrucis from the Holy Grail, they change. They become more powerful than they could have ever dreamed."

"Reyzl regenerated faster," I said. "He didn't seem like he gained any other power." At least not compared to before he drank the blood.

She laughed. "We didn't let him live long enough for the blood to get through his entire system, to effect a total change. Anyway, Reyzl was a fool. His ambitions were small."

I felt Ulnyx again, and the single crack in the barrier lengthened and began to spider out. I saw Rebecca with my Sight now. I saw how she had changed. I saw the raw power that she possessed, even here, even now when the body and voice she was using were not her own. Through the distortion, I could suddenly see that all the time I had spent lamenting her betrayal had been wasted time. She couldn't have betrayed me, because she had never been with me.

"So you knew what the Grail would do for you the whole time?" I asked, growing angry. "That's why you saved me from Reyzl at your party?"

"Landon, wait," she said. She hesitated, and then nodded. "It's true. When I helped you escape I was taking a risk that you would be able to get your hands on the Grail, and I would be able to use it. Merov told me what it could do. He went on and on about it, about

how he wished he could find a diuscrucis to bleed. Anyway, that was how it started, but that isn't the whole story. I care for you. I really, really do."

She wasn't lying.

"Then why didn't you just ask? I was raw enough. I would have done it."

She looked sad. Genuinely sad. "Would you have understood that I needed to go to Hell? Would have have understood why? You were a Divine for all of three days. Even now, I'm not sure you'll understand."

"You went to Hell *on purpose* ?" I asked. "You're right, I don't understand. But I guess that's why we're here."

I felt one last pinch from Ulnyx, and the cracked glass shattered. It was like being released from a hypnotic trance, with all of the clarity and understanding flooding into me at once. I don't know how Rebecca had done it, but the Were had helped me escape.

"It wasn't enough to survive, was it? Not for a demon. You needed to become the Queen."

This whole time I had been pinning the title on Charis, sure that she was the one trying to trip me up. Demon Queen was a title, not a name. The most powerful female demon on Earth. But why the glamour? Why try to keep me from seeing it? Another test?

"I need more than that," she said, reaching out and touching my hand. "You once asked me if we could be together. We can, Landon. I want us to. I went to Hell because I needed to learn. I returned because what I was taught will allow us, you and me, to change everything. Angels, demons, and humans living together. A future for all of us. A future for the two of us."

Some of what she said were true, but not all of it. I realized with a start that whatever spell she had put on me, it wasn't to keep me from identifying her as the Demon Queen. It was to keep me from recognizing her lies. That she had told them at all was my hint that she had no idea the charm had been broken. Which part had she been lying about?

"Gervais told me about your plans for the future," I said. I decided to keep dancing to her tune, to see what she might reveal.

"Gervais is almost as simple as Reyzl," she snapped, her eyes flashing empty and black for the barest of instants. "What he thinks he knows, and what is true are two completely different things. There's a war, Landon. A hidden war whose boundaries aren't as

clearly drawn as Heaven versus Hell. I know you've been tracking the messages. It's how I lured you here."

'Lured' was an interesting choice of words. Would I have heard it before, or would I have heard something else? "What is the war about? And what do you need me for?"

She smiled again, leaning forward so that her… Cho's face was close to mine. "Change," she said. "Justice. Power. The end of an old, tired God."

Did she say God? I fought to stay composed. "Mankind is part of this new world order?" I asked.

"Of course, my love," she said, her eyes dilating, her voice a coo. "The dark brothers and sisters will need sustenance in the days to come, and all of us can benefit from slaves."

It took all of my will to keep up the charade. She had said "my love." It was no lie. She had also said she intended to use humans as slaves and meat. My stomach turned.

"As for you," she continued, "your power is obvious. And there are other things I want from you."

She was standing now, leaning towards me, her lips hungry. I wasn't ready to show my hand, so I leaned forward and joined her in the kiss. It was deep, and emotional, and I could feel her power burning through her saliva and licking at my soul.

"What about Sarah?" I asked, once the kiss had ended. It had taken my breath away, despite the fact that a good part of me was finding her words repulsive. There was still some piece in there somewhere that knew absolute evil, that embraced it and found succor in it. It was the part of me that still cared for her, and it had a strong voice.

"She's our prize," she said. "It's her power that will end the old God, and allow a new one to take His place."

A new one? "How do you replace a God?" This wasn't balance. This was betrayal beyond anything I could have imagined.

"Just say you're with me, and you'll see."

I took a deep breath. I closed my eyes. I focused on Rebecca-as-Cho, mentally reaching for the strand of power that I knew had to be connecting them. It wasn't hard to find, her energy was so great that it writhed and pulsated in a huge, bright, tendon.

"How can I say no to you?" I asked.

"I knew you wouldn't," she said, smiling.

It was time to end the charade. I took hold of the tendon and

squeezed it tight, causing Cho's eyes to open wide and his jaw to fall slack. "You're the fool," I hissed. "You either overestimated yourself, or underestimated me, but be assured that I'll stop you. This is the realm of man, and it's going to stay that way."

I pulled the plug on her, and Cho tumbled backward into his chair. His eyes closed, and then opened. The archvampire laughed.

"I told her you wouldn't do it," he said. "Her love for you clouds her judgement."

I didn't have time to reply, because it was all I could do to duck back away from his fingers that stretched and sharpened into razor claws. His pupils vanished in a sea of black, and his fangs hung out over his lip.

Screams filled the restaurant. Cho came at me, his body a blur of motion, leaping over the table. I focused, lifting the table up and slamming it into him, pushing him upwards into the ceiling. He left a dent in the plaster before he fell back to the ground, landing on his feet.

My Sight exploded as six more vampires revealed themselves. She had hidden them from me.

"Where is she?" I shouted at Cho, rushing forward, leading with my fists. He ducked away from the blows, the smile still on his face.

"You can still change your mind," he said. "Stop this now. She wants to be with you. You saw the gift she left you." He came back with an attack of his own, his claws moving faster than I thought possible, catching my chest before I could move beyond them. It hurt, but it healed.

I could still hear the screams. I twisted my head and saw that the other vampires weren't coming for me. They were attacking the patrons. I looked back at Cho. He stood motionless, waiting to see what I would do.

"You don't need to save them," he said. "You aren't one of them. Not anymore. It isn't your job to protect them. Come with me, be a king and claim your queen."

"I'd ask you to send her a message from me, but you aren't going to live to do it," I said, overtaken by the total calm of absolute understanding. I focused, throwing Cho against the wall and pinning him with solid air. "Wait there."

I grabbed the closest weapon at hand, a steak knife lying on the nearest table. Screams still drowned out any other sound in the room, though the vampires were thinning the ranks in a hurry. I

leaped on the nearest one and jabbed the knife into the back of his head, letting the silver blade sink through his skull. He cried out and dropped the woman he had been drinking from, falling face-first to the floor with a kick to the back of his spine.

He should have been out of the fight, a silver shard in his brain more than enough to keep him down. I watched while his hand reached around, seeking the blade. When he found it, he pulled it out, and the wound immediately closed over. I looked back at Cho, who was laughing in his prison. I realized why he had been familiar to me. I realized why all of the vampires were familiar to me. My blood was running in their veins, passed from the Holy Grail to Rebecca's lips, and from Rebecca's body to theirs.

The room fell quiet, the bodies of the people who had been enjoying a quiet night out at a fine restaurant left scattered on the floor. Some had been drained, others just put down like no more than meat. I reached for Ulnyx's power, but I knew I couldn't fight all of them like that. The Were's form was massively powerful, but it was also massive, an easy target and difficult to maneuver in confined spaces. I swung my head in a circle, searching for anything that I could use. There was nothing that would be enough.

"You're fortunate, Mr. Hamilton," Cho said, still trapped in my cage. There was no point wasting my energy on it. I let him go.

"Why is that?" I asked as he walked over.

"She wasn't lying when she said she needed you." He reached into his pocket, taking out a small black box covered in seraphim scripture. It bore a resemblance to a Rubik's cube, one made of polished ebony and inlaid with gold. "It's hard to hold a diuscrucis. At least when they resist."

I didn't need him to tell me what it was, I had met its former inhabitants only hours earlier. So that was why they had been set free. I looked over his shoulder at the window behind him.

"You won't make it," he said, placing the box on the ground in front of me. "Avriel was careless. He didn't ward his trap from use by demons."

My mind was racing, trying to find a way out. I could reach the window, I was sure of it. Whether I would have enough left to survive the fall was the real question. I would have to find out.

Cho started speaking, his voice smoothly reciting the language of God's children. The scripture on the box began to glow, softly at first but gaining intensity. I could feel it pulling at me, beckoning to

me. I was out of time.

I heard the elevator door slide open. I heard the boom of a gun, and felt the sting of buckshot rip into my flesh. Cho stumbled backward, his chest spreading open, his skin hissing. Three more shots fired, and I heard the cries of pain from the other vampires. The smell of frankincense filled the air.

"Well," said a voice from the edge of the elevator. "Are you going to stand there, or are you going to escape?"

I was going to escape. I ran to the elevator, bending down and grabbing the box on the way. When I reached the doors, a meaty hand grabbed my shoulder and threw me inside. Two more rounds fired from the shotgun, peppering the vampires with more of the buckshot.

"How?" I asked. The shot was only slowing them, but it was working a lot better than the silver had. The elevator began its descent.

"Plastic shot," he said, "filled with holy water."

I looked up at my rescuer. Way up. He was a monster of a man, at least seven feet tall, with thick arms, thick legs, and a round middle. His long wool overcoat made him look even bigger, hanging from broad shoulders down to his size twenty-something combat boots. He had long brown hair with huge sideburns and a heavy goatee that made his eyes look tiny and lost on his face. He was holding the shotgun in one hand like it was some kind of toy, using his other to reload it.

"We're not going to make it," I said. I focused my Sight above us. The vamps were forcing open the elevator door and starting to come down.

"Take a look around, Landon," he said.

I looked down. The Divine I had Seen earlier were encircling the base of the Tower. Touched, but not like any Touched I had ever met before. Just like the behemoth in the elevator with me.

"If you could get me a clear shot, I'd appreciate it," he said.

I focused, ripping the metal around us away so that he had a good view of the vampires crawling down the side of the Tower. He fired again, and the lead vamp stopped moving as its face was shredded. A moment later I heard an even louder pop, and the demon was ripped from its perch and tossed aside like a rag doll.

"You know my name, but I don't know yours," I said.

"Ezekiel," he said. "You can call me Zeek." He held out his

massive ham hand. I took it and gave it a strong shake. “You’re lucky M’lady has been keeping an eye on you.”

Two more pops, and another scream as a vampire was blasted from the Tower. A shout sounded from the ground, and I looked down to see that Cho had skipped the climb. He was already earthbound, finding the shooters and tearing them apart. The moment our ride touched down, I made to head in the archvampire’s direction. Zeek grabbed me.

“I said escape,” he said, pointing across the street to a plain gray van.

“They’ll die,” I said, throwing his hand from my shoulder.

He nodded. “They’re ready to die. I don’t like it either, but there’s no other way. You can’t beat Cho right now without bringing the world down around you.”

I knew it was true, and it wasn’t time to bring the world down around me. Not yet. I let him lead me to the van. I could see Cho watching us as we pulled away, his mouth covered in the blood of Zeek’s allies, that damn smile still on his face.

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We drove in silence for the first ten minutes, Zeek's mind surely on the fate of his comrades, my mind reeling from the discoveries I had made. The biggest one, the one that was twisting the knife in my gut deeply enough to be twisting Josette too - Rebecca was fighting for the wrong team, and Sarah was with Rebecca. No, that wasn't it. Sarah was helping Rebecca. I had no proof, but I was sure of it.

I could have agonized over what I had done wrong in watching out for her, and helping to raise her. Too much 'ninja training'? Not enough attention? Not enough affection? I knew it was none of those things. She was a real diuscrucis, and like it or not evil was in her nature. So was good, which meant there was still hope. Just as much as I was sure she was helping Rebecca, I was just as sure that the new Demon Queen had manipulated her into doing it. Maybe all it had taken was to put her in front of Gervais with the opportunity to get even.

Still, I longed for a minute to breath, to try to relax and close my eyes, to get back to Josette so we could work our way through everything together. I'd even welcome Ulnyx at this point, to lend

me his demonic perspective. There had to be some benefit to having his soul mixed with mine beyond an enhanced sense of smell and the ability to shift into a huge smelly monster. I had a feeling minutes to breath would get harder to come by, not easier.

"Where are we going?" I asked Zeek, breaking the silence at last. I could see the guilt and pain written on the man's giant face. I could smell the intensity of his emotions.

"I'm taking you to M'lady," he replied. "Two hours to the airport, another two to Zurich. We'll be there before dawn."

Back the way I had come. We'd likely be flying over Gervais' chateau, where Izak and Lylyx were waiting. "I need to make a phone call," I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out my cell.

It rang twice before Lylyx picked it up. "Lylyx, it's Landon. You've got to get Izak, and you've got to get out of the chateau. Tell him to take you somewhere safe, I'm sure he knows where."

"Landon, are you okay?" Lylyx asked. Her concern was sincere.

"I've been better, but I'll survive," I replied. "I want you to survive too. Where's Izak?"

"He's still down in the basement with Gervais, but at least the screaming stopped a while ago. I came upstairs. I can be evil, and I can be cruel, and I can kill anything that tries to stop me from getting what I want, but this was something else. What's going on?"

I couldn't imagine anything that would rattle a Great Were. It made my skin crawl. "I don't have time to explain. Just get him and get out. I'm pretty sure there are some nasty demons headed your way, and I don't think even Izak can take them all. I'll call you again when I have more time."

"Okay," Lylyx said. "Stay safe."

I looked over at Zeek. Something told me that was going to be a hard request to grant. "You too," I said. I hung up.

"Lylyx is working for them," Zeek said.

"Not anymore," I replied. "That's why I need to get her someplace safe. Once Rebecca finds out I took over the pack, she's going to be out for blood." Not to mention, she had been surprised that Izak was still alive. There was no way she wasn't going to try to rectify that miscalculation.

He raised his eyebrow. "You took over the pack?"

"I absorbed the soul of their former alpha, a Great Were named Ulnyx. He told me about some loophole that let me challenge for position."

Zeek's laughter boomed and echoed in the van. "M'lady is going to love that one," he said. His mirth spent, he returned to glowering. "You said Ulnyx?" he asked after another breath. "I knew a were once who went by that name. It was a long time ago." His small eyes rotated towards me. "Ulnyx is a pretty uncommon name, even for a demon. Maybe he knows me? I went under a different name back then. They called me Tobias the Grand."

I felt Ulnyx kick, hard. Zeek smiled, a friendly but malevolent smile. The demon's power surged in me, and I sensed the memory flooding forward, overwhelming my defenses, and dropping me towards darkness. Zeek's smile faded, his brow furrowing. I heard him say my name, but then he vanished in the present.

* * *

"Uncle, look!"

Rolix is excited when he sees the red flag raised high in the center of the village, a signal to the outlying properties that the King's Fair is in town. I look over at the pup and smile, the fair always means good hunting.

"Do you think they'll have acrobats, like the fair back home?" he asks.

At nearly sixteen, Rolix is barely a pup any longer, the time for his first hunt upon him. It's the reason we've traveled so far, from the familiar humidity of the Delta to the coldness of the west. Along the way I have taught him all that I know about survival, and some of what I know about thriving in our world. It's rare for the alpha to embark on a First Hunt with any of the brood, but Rolix is his father's son, and his father is the only one in the pack I can trust. This is the depth of our bond, forged in the blood of our enemies and strengthened by domination. Rolix is also the closest I'll ever come to offspring of my own.

"You are a pup still, Rolix," I say. "But come nightfall you will have outgrown acrobats and magicians. If you haven't, you won't survive for long." It's a cold reality, one that all of the pack must be prepared for if they're to survive.

Rolix growls and nods in agreement. "I know that Uncle. Since it is my last day to enjoy it; I want to savor it one final time, before I cast it from my mind forever."

I fear for the length of his life, the way he clings to his childhood. My

own First Hunt came when I was only seven, when I demanded the right to kill for myself. I know he'll never be an alpha, and that he'll never take a mate. It's better this way, I tell myself. I will never have to defend myself from him. I will never have to kill him.

"Fine," I say. His fate is not my fate. "Let's see if there are acrobats."

The fair is crowded with peasantry, all centered on a simple wooden stage that has been constructed in the center of the town. Spread around it are hastily constructed booths of all kinds, the mortals selling their hot pies, streamers, baskets, and any other random trinkets they have the limited skills to create. We push our way through the crowds. At first getting looks for our foreign appearance, but I've learned the simplest ways to manipulate the fear of the sheep, and within a few steps we are strange no longer. I take a deep breath, ignoring the stench of the grime that covers the skin and clothes and picking out the warm blood beneath it. A feast tonight. It makes being here to watch the fools dance bearable.

"Uncle, this is incredible," Rolix says, his eyes wide to take in the bustle and energy of the crowds. He points up at the stage, where a monster of a man has made his appearance. Dressed in a long blue velvet robe hanging open at the waist, with a bare chest and simple leather pants, he is easily the largest human I have ever seen, not just in height but in sheer mass, with enormous muscled arms and a wide barrel chest. Not just a human, I can taste it in the air. Divine. I see his eyes dance our way, and I give him only a slight nod of understanding. I know what he is, and I'm not afraid.

The man doesn't flinch, doesn't react. His eyes work their way across the crowd as though he had seen nothing he wasn't expecting. The meat still moves around me, unaware of the newcomer. Until he speaks.

"Ladies and Lords." His voice booms across the crowd, stopping all of the conversation, all of the motion. They are like rabbits frozen by an oncoming fox, still and attentive in their surprise.

"Ladies and Lords," he says again, more quietly. "It is my humble honor to be here before you today. My name is Tobias the Grand, master illusionist and strongest of the strong, and I'd like to tell you a tale."

"Let's get to the front," Rolix exclaims, pushing his way through the crowd towards the front of the stage. I'd rather keep my distance from this Divine, but I won't let the pup too far from my sight. I too approach the stage.

"This is a tale of good and evil, of the world above, and the world

below."

He moves his hands, and flames puff out in the air in front of him. Another motion and wisps of clouds twirl around him like a cobra. The crowd 'oohs' and claps, and I see they are regaining their minds, shifting themselves for a better view of this Tobias.

"There are monsters that walk Britannia, my friends," he says, his voice grand and overemphasized. "Monsters that would eat your soul and burp up dung."

His illusions follow his speech - casting a shadow of a were, and having it double over to expel something from its mouth. This gets a laugh from the gathering, but I don't react. There is no mistake he looks at me before beginning his next sentence, and I see the challenge for what it is. Not here, not now. Tonight. There will be no dining on sheep until the shepherd has been dealt with.

"He is a fool," I say to Rolix. The pup is enamored with the show. He seems unable to understand how the hulk on stage is mocking us.

"His tricks are amazing," he replies.

Tobias continues his show. He brings out puppets, a man and a wolf. The man tricks the wolf and destroys it, much to the amusement of the crowd. He laughs along with them, taking the wolf puppet and throwing it in my direction. Rolix catches it, laughing, oblivious. I've had enough. I grab the pup by the neck and pull him from the crowd. I can hear the 'oohs' and 'ahs' behind us as we retreat away from the gathering, reaching a small alley between a smithy and an apothecary.

"Do you understand nothing?" I ask, ripping the wolf puppet from Rolix's hands. "Do you not see what this Tobias is?"

Rolix backs away, his head down in submission. "He is Divine," he says.

"What kind of Divine?" I growl, throwing the wolf puppet out of the alley and into the small thoroughfare.

He looks up at me with dumb eyes. "I do not know Uncle."

I'm tempted to cut his throat right there, to spare his father the embarrassment of this imbecile. I had thought I could bring the pup to his senses, but I had been wrong. I snarl and raise my hand, changing it to a sharp set of claws. Rolix's eyes widen, and he drops to his knees.

"Please uncle," he says. "I don't understand."

I want to do it, but I pause. I can't return to the Delta alone. A fool the pup may be, but he may still have use. I lower my claws and reach out with my hand. "Come," I say to him. "Put your childhood aside Rolix. Tonight we hunt."

“Today you die,” the voice says from the mouth of the alley. I recognize the sound, and I recognize the scent.

“Rolix, stay behind me,” I say, pushing him away from Tobias and turning to face the man. I don’t say anything. Instead, I shift, feeling the strength pour into my body, my face elongating into a muzzle filled with sharp fangs, my body sprouting fur, my hands and feet growing a complete set of claws. I growl softly.

Tobias smiles and reaches under his velvet cloak, dropping it to the ground. A single strap rests across his chest, and he reaches behind for a short handled, double-bladed axe that had been strapped to his back. When he brings it forward, I see the eye tattooed to his wrist.

“Templar,” I hiss, crouching down, preparing for the fight. “Have sense and flee. I am no petty were, but Ulnyx, alpha of the Mekong Delta.”

“You’re all the same to me,” he says, charging.

He comes at me, and his strength is overwhelming. I slip away from his blade, twisting past the forehand and the backhand, which lead me right into his fist. The force of it sends me sprawling backward, and I kick up dirt and stone scrambling to maintain my feet. Tobias wastes no time, his massive frame propelling him towards me, his axe coming down from above. I slip aside, digging into the dirt with my feet and kicking dirt up into his face. He groans and stumbles, but rolls away before my claws can find his flesh.

“You’re quick for your size,” I say, returning to a fighting posture while he rises to his feet. The first effort is a draw.

“You’re ugly, even for your kind,” he replies, spitting onto the ground between us.

I snarl and charge, leaping towards him, twisting to avoid his axe and catching his wrist on my forearm. The force shatters my bones, but it shatters his as well, and the axe falls from his hand. I try to scratch his face, but his arms are too long, and his other hand grabs my face and pushes me to the ground. I manage to roll over, but as soon as I do a monstrous boot presses me to the dirt.

“Stay still,” he says, pressing down harder when I struggle. “I’ll make it swift.”

He bends over, reaching for the axe. When he does, Rolix leaps from the shadows, landing on the Templar’s back, raking him with his claws. He lets out a short grunt, and then throws himself backward against the wall of the smithy, sandwiching Rolix between his muscle and the stone. A low cry is all I hear, and when Tobias steps forward again I see Rolix

tumble to the ground, broken.

"No," I roar, moving to regain my feet. The pup will heal, but only if he has time. As for the Templar, his face is pale, the demon poison beginning to spread through his veins.

That doesn't stop him from putting his boot on my neck and forcing me back down. That doesn't stop him from picking up his axe and turning to Rolix.

"You care for this one?" he asks, right before he plants the blade in Rolix's chest.

The blessed runes flare, and his chest begins to smoke, small whimpers the only indication that he feels the pain of his demise.

My hands scramble against the foot on my neck, but a layer of chain hides beneath the cloth and I can't break through. The pain is clear on Tobias' face when he looks at me, his face twisted in anger.

"Next time," he says, removing his foot from my neck, his axe from Rolix, and running out of the alley. I assume he seeks holy water, and I hope he dies before he finds some.

* * *

The van was still moving when the memory faded, but I was slumped over, my forehead pressed against the dashboard. Zeek was on the phone, talking to somebody. Whoever 'M'lady' was, I supposed.

"Hey, he's awake. I'll see you soon. Of course, M'lady." He disconnected and tossed his own cell onto the dash. "Sorry, Landon," he said. "I didn't know that would happen."

I lifted my head and leaned back. "Me neither," I replied. I studied him for a minute, remembering the anger that guided the axe into the young were. "Why did you do it?" I ask. Ulnyx's pain, his shame in failing to protect the boy was still resonating through my emotion.

"My wife was named Katherine," he said, sadness filtering into his voice. "She was the sun that I revolved around, a perfect beauty, and a friend without equal." He paused, remembering her. "She was killed by a demon the year before. Even though I destroyed the creature, I carried the pain and anger of her loss with me still. When I saw the were, when I saw his arrogance, I wanted to kill him. Then, when I saw how he cared for the boy, I wanted him to suffer, the way I was suffering. It never should have happened. For

whatever it's worth, I'm sorry."

He was being honest, but it wasn't worth anything to me. Ulnyx was silent, so I could only guess he didn't care either. "I thought the Templars were supposed to be looking out for Heaven's best interests? Never mind the reasons, why would you be sorry to have killed a demon?"

His eyes found the road again. "I'll let M'lady explain," he said. "The short version is because the story goes a lot deeper than you know right now. You haven't been around that long, not for a Divine. This is pretty new to you. There're an awful lot of others who find it all a part of ancient history."

I put my eyes on the road, trying to decide if I should push the conversation or not. A lot of questions were circling in the maelstrom of my mind. The one that wasn't present was the identity of 'M'lady'. If I pieced everything together, it all started to make a very convoluted sort of sense.

"There's a mattress in the back of the van, if you want to catch a few," Zeek said, motioning towards the rear. "But you probably don't sleep."

I slipped out of the seat and crept to the back.

"No, but I'm working on my zen," I replied.

The back of the van was barren save for the small mattress and a couple of boxes of junk food. If Zeek was a Templar, that meant he had drank from the Grail and gained an immortal life span as one of his new talents. Even so, he was still mortal, and still needed to eat. I guess it didn't matter what.

I dropped over onto the mattress and closed my eyes, not trying to fall asleep, but trying to shake the last vestiges of Ulnyx's memory from my soul. I was surprised by the level of emotion the Were had exhibited towards the boy; while his primary concern was the embarrassment of losing his charge and failing to kill Zeek, that he felt anything at all towards Rolix showed me that even with access to his past I had misjudged him as nothing but a monster. That didn't make him a good guy by any stretch, but it did show a semblance of humanity that I hadn't believed he possessed.

The key to being in tune with Josette and Ulnyx was letting myself relax and somehow easing off on my nascent defenses, so I laid there completely still and focused on my breathing, trying to let go of the state of alarm I had been in since Mr. Ross had dropped me on the Statue of Liberty. Five years, and I was only

beginning to see the true depth of what I had become, and more importantly what I was losing. No wonder I suddenly felt so overmatched again.

I'm not sure how much time passed. It couldn't have been too long, because we weren't that far from the airfield. I lay on the mattress for some time before a single thought, a single word passed up and resonated in my soul as no more than a whisper.

"*Landon* ," Josette said.

I didn't open my eyes, but tried to stay calm and centered. I could sense a single fine thread snaking behind the blackness behind my eyes. I reached out for it, taking a gentle hold on the end.

"*Josette* ," I said. My voice echoed in the dark hollow, but the thread vibrated in response.

"*I hear you* ," she replied. "*It is faint, but I hear you.* "

"*Sarah* ," I said. My hold was tenuous, and it seemed too much effort would blow it away like smoke.

"*She is diuscrucis. She can be saved.* " Her confidence was unwavering. It gave me comfort.

"*She may need to die* ," a new voice interrupted.

Another thread, dark and hard to see. I didn't need to see it to know Ulnyx. I reached out again, splitting my attention, careful not to lose my grip on Josette. Before I could take hold of it, it latched onto me. Not an attack, but an effort to stay connected.

"*She might* ," I admitted. I could feel Josette's sorrow wash through me.

"*You are not wrong, demon* ," Josette said. "*But not without trying to save her. You have seen her goodness and charity. Such things cannot be lost so easily. Just ask Izak.* "

"*Izak is unique* ," Ulnyx said. "*He was never meant to be one of us. Don't expect such softness from any other demons. You've seen it yourself with your vampire honey.* "

I wanted to be angry at the comment, but there was nothing. No emotion could travel through this connection. Only whispers. "*Who is he?* " I asked. "*I saw him visit you in your cell. I saw how you cared for him.* "

The threads didn't move.

"Josette? Ulnyx?"

There was no reply. I felt a lightness reaching across my flesh, and I opened my eyes. Zeek was standing in the rear of the van, the

back doors thrown open. A light breeze was filtering in, and I could see the small aircraft waiting behind him, propellers already spinning. He had a pastry in his mouth, crumbs in his beard, and donuts in each of his hands.

“Time to fly,” he mumbled through bits of danish.

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I spent the first ninety minutes of the two-hour flight trying to recapture my calm and get back the threads of Josette and Ulnyx's souls. Between the shaking of the twin-prop while it winged its way past the Alps, and the crunching of candy bars and crackling of cellophane bags, it was an impossible task. I opened my eyes and cast a murderous glance over at the giant Templar, who I could swear was forcing the plane to fly slightly banked to the left. He was too busy consuming sugar to notice, so I looked forward to our pilot, a Spanish mortal named Javier. According to Zeek, the flight had been contracted by M'lady, and so the man had no idea what it was he was carrying.

"Have you been flying long?" I asked him. He had given each of us headphones so we could speak over the din of the engines, but Zeek had been cut out because the cans didn't fit over his skull.

"Affirmative," he replied, holding out a bony arm and flashing me the okay. He was an almost comical inverse of the Templar, short enough to need a booster on his seat and thin enough to see the skeleton beneath his skin. "Thirty-five years. I got my start in

the Spanish Air Force, it was the easiest way to pay for flight training." He laughed hoarsely. "After that, I spent a few years doing cargo hauls, and then a few more as an instructor. The last five have been as an indie. I bought Bella here twenty years ago at an auction. Now I'm living my dream."

I couldn't see his smile, but I could feel it. It dug into me more deeply than I had expected. A man living his dream. *This* is what I was fighting for. I'd been avoiding the finite life for so long, I'd forgotten what it was.

"You resurrected her yourself?" I asked.

"Sure thing," he replied. "Took me almost twenty years of parts auctions, graveyards, and some of the oddest jobs you can think of, but I put her together piece by piece with these hands." He lifted them from the yoke to show them off. The calluses and wear on his fingernails made it clear how much time he had given to the task.

"She's a marvel," I said.

I leaned back in my seat and looked out the window to the right. There was some scattered cloud cover we were skirting on top of, and beyond that some of the taller peaks poked through like icebergs on a white sea. The moon was resting high in the sky, a thin sliver that didn't provide much light, not that I needed it. I was about to lean forward again to ask Javier about the mountains when my stomach lurched forward and I got super dizzy. The balance. Something had just happened to give it a bad push to the dark side. Remembering what Gervais had said he thought Rebecca and Sarah planned to do, it was an effort to keep breathing. Was she really going through with it? It seemed impossible.

A sudden explosion of heat in my Sight brought me out of my stupor. I lunged forward and grabbed the yoke from Javier, pulling it back and twisting it, praying that the pilot's loving workmanship would be enough to spare the craft. A gout of flame sped past the window, close enough for the heat to leech through.

"What the hell was that?" Javier cried, pushing my hands away from the steering. His expression was tight, and I could smell his fear.

"Landon?" Zeek was shoved back in his seat, a soda spilled on his lap.

I could See the fire demon out beyond, circling around for another pass. It was worse than that - three angels were angling on a direct path for the plane. Not fallen angels, but straight from

Heaven angels, working in concert with the demon. It was Rebecca's promise, already being fulfilled.

"Sword?" I asked the Templar. He pointed at the back of the plane, where a small lockbox was resting.

I focused, pulling it to me and snapping the locks. "Javier, dive now," I said, flipping open the lid and pulling out the blessed axe. The same one that had killed Rolix. I could feel Ulnyx's desire to plant it in the Templar's chest. It was a good thing he wasn't in control.

"I can't go too far my friend, or we'll crash into the mountains," he said, calm and cool in the face of something he couldn't possibly understand. He was a former military man, his training had taken over.

The plane dipped forward, forcing Zeek to put his feet up to keep him from slamming into the pilot's seat. The maneuver threw the angels off, and they hung stationary for a few seconds before they followed the fire demon downward behind us.

"How did they find us?" Zeek asked.

I started to shake my head, then felt my stomach drop. "Sarah," I said softly. She knew where I was. She *always* knew where I was. If there was any remaining doubt she was helping Rebecca, it fled in that instant. There was no time to lament though. I had to act.

"What now?" Javier asked, pulling back and leveling the plane.

"Just don't fly straight," I said to him. "Try to be unpredictable."

I focused on the hatch and pushed it open, holding the freezing air to prevent it from rushing in. I walked over to the edge and looked out, seeing the fire demon behind us, its mighty wings pumping hard to keep pace with the craft. It didn't seem possible that something so large could move at such speed, but the laws of the mortal world had no bearing on the Divine, no matter how big and ugly they were. I took a deep breath and hopped out onto the wing, planting myself to the metal and pushing the door back closed. Even though the angels had started behind the fire demon, they were more like fighters, so much faster and more nimble. They reached me first.

I had to focus to hold myself on the plane against the buffeting wind. The angels shot into view, wings swept back like falcons, swords held forward at their chests like spears. I gauged the distance to the lead seraph and loosed the axe, feeling a bit like Thor when it shredded through a wing and I pulled it back to me.

The afflicted angel turned over and tumbled from the sky. He would live and the wing would regenerate, but it would keep him out of this fight; not to mention hurt like hell. The other two slowed their pace, planning their approach more carefully.

Javier was an expert, and the plane jerked and skittered along the thermals, leaving the angels to make constant adjustments, their wings flaring in and out as they attempted to close the gap. I left my perch on the wing and started walking towards the tail, holding the axe ready to throw. The pilot was almost too skilled, making it difficult to line up a shot.

Just when I thought I had an opening, the targeted angel dipped from my sight, falling away. The remaining seraph deftly slipped her sword over her back and replaced it with a dagger. She pulled up, twisting and turning upright, leaving me a huge target, but getting in the perfect position for an attack of her own. The dagger sped through the air with an impossible velocity, leaving me just enough time to get the axe up to block it.

At the same time I did, the second seraph reappeared right behind me, pounding into me with the full weight of his body. I fell forwards, watching the fuselage of the plane speeding away. I jammed the axe into the tin, tightening my grip on the handle and preventing myself from being thrown out into the open air.

The second angel landed on the wing and drew his sword, a blank expression on his face. He started towards me, and I was considering how to handle him when I saw the cockpit door swing open and the end of a shotgun stick through it. Whatever Zeek was using for buckshot, it wasn't holy water. The angel screamed and tumbled from the plane.

I pulled myself back to my feet and focused on my Sight, searching for the fire demon somewhere behind us. The plane was diving again, drifting downward into the clouds. I could only imagine that Javier was doing his best to keep us out of view. If only that would be enough to stop the oncoming demon. I found him well back of the plane, a hundred yards at least and staying away. The action alone told me something wasn't right, and if recent history meant anything it was that my Sight wasn't completely trustworthy. I turned my head, looking around for enemies in the whiteout of the clouds.

It wasn't my Sight that saved my head; it was Ulnyx's sense of smell. I knew the scent of sulfur and dust that passed instantly in

the stiff wind, and I jumped backward towards the end of the wing just in time to avoid the heavy blade that slashed where my neck had been. At the same time I heard the crackle of breaking glass, and looked forward to the cockpit. A second fallen was smashing her way through the windshield, trying to get at Javier and bring the plane down.

I reached for Unlyx's power, feeling my body changing as I shifted, becoming the Great Were. The fallen angel on the wing came at me, his sword a toothpick to the thick hide of the Great Were. I slapped it away from him, and dug my claws deep into his stomach, lifting him up and throwing him backward off the plane. With a snarl, I coiled and sprung, landing just behind the surprised fallen angel and using my momentum to throw her from the aircraft. I heard a snap when her body collided with the right-hand propeller, and the plane began to list.

Javier's face was tight with concentration while he worked to keep the ship level and airborne. A thick plume of black smoke trailed from the afflicted engine, and in my Sight I knew the damage was enough to give the fire demon the extra boost it needed to overtake us. I turned and looked back down the length of the fuselage, to where the blessed axe still clung to the aluminum like Excalibur.

"This is crazy," I said out loud, reverting my form and dashing back along the length of the plane. When I reached the axe I focused, pulling it to my hand as I pushed off, launching out into the empty space beyond with the clouds a dreamlike mist surrounding and aiding to disguise my kamikaze launch.

The demon's massive body came into view out of nowhere, a mirage solidifying before me. I brought the axe up over my head and chopped it down on the creature's chest, slamming into its body with my own and planting the weapon deep into it. The demon cried out in pain and tried to smack me off with a huge claw, but I hopped onto the extruding handle of the axe and used it to launch myself upward over the attack. Once I had reached my zenith, I twisted and reached out, grabbing the demon's neck and swinging around to land on its back. Its wings were beginning to beat more slowly now, and I could smell the frankincense heavy on the air. The fire demon was dying, and I was stuck on its back at least a thousand feet in back of the plane.

I looked down, but all I saw were clouds. I could guess what was

underneath me - jagged mountain peaks and a more than slightly painful landing. I wasn't so much afraid of the pain as I was of the possibility that I could find myself decapitated by a jagged edge, or crushed beyond my ability to regenerate. It wasn't the time for indecision.

I pulled at the flow of power running through me and focused, reaching out to Purgatory to make the changes there that would alter reality here; the changes that would either spare me, or destroy me. The fire demon was dying beneath me, and it groaned and gurgled while the last vestiges of existence slipped away. I unwrapped my arms from the demon's neck and pushed back, getting away from the carcass and beginning my free fall. My heart raced to my throat as I pushed harder, demanding the world to change in a way that went above all logic, and threw the laws of physics and gravity to the cold wind.

I flew forward like a rocket, my skin pushing back against my skull, my clothes rippling around me. Within seconds I had reached the plane, and I altered my direction and forced my velocity to shift and reduce. Too fast. I was going too fast. I could see the fuselage approaching in a hurry. I could feel Purgatory's energy slipping away. My head exploded as it rammed into the side of the aircraft and I dropped flat onto the wing, taking a desperate hold on Ulnyx's power and using it to shift a hand to a claw and dig it into the tin to secure me. What I had done had been a gamble, and I knew it was going to have consequences. Not only could I feel the small wobble I had just created in the fabric of reality, but I could also feel my consciousness slipping away. The last thing I saw was the door swinging open and Zeek reaching out for me. I could only hope he wasn't too attached to that axe.

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I knew where I was the moment I woke up. The Statue of Liberty, laying on Rebecca's bed. I could smell her perfume hanging in the air around me, and feel the softness of the sheets I had never lain on before, despite the days and weeks I had spent there.

I took a deep breath and felt a tingle run along my spine and through my limbs. I knew where I was, but something was off. No, everything was off, just a little bit, just enough to tell me that I wasn't really where I seemed to be.

"Landon."

I sat up with a start. "Sarah?" Her voice was unmistakable. I looked around, but I didn't see her.

"I'm here."

Suddenly, she was right there in front of me near the foot of the bed. Like everything else, she was a little off too. It wasn't just that her eyes were whole, they always were in these places between. It was something else; nothing that I could see, or smell, or touch. It just *was* . She was wearing a simple lace dress that fell to her knees, simple black ballerina slippers and a red flower in her hair. She was

smiling at me, her white teeth sparkling behind red lipsticked lips.

"Where are we?" I asked. I reached backward, trying to remember how I had gotten here, but the answers were evasive. The last thing I could recall was having dinner at the Eiffel Tower with Rebecca. It had been a wonderful meal, and afterward we had danced like the night of her birthday party. After that… after that I must have gone to sleep, because now I was here.

"We're inside your soul," she said.

She waved her arm languidly across her body, and one of the walls faded from view. I was bathed in a blinding luminescence, so bright it was impossible to look beyond. I knew it for what it was.

"The link to my Source," I said, rolling off the bed and stepping towards it.

She angled around to step in front of me. "It's beautiful," she said. She took my hand. "You're beautiful."

The way she said it was disconcerting. I tried to move away, but I was frozen in place.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Relax," she said. "I'm here to keep you safe. You've done your best to protect me, and now I want to protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

She brushed her hand across my cheek. It was soft, warm, and tender. "The world is going to change, brother. The world has to change. I know you've tried your best, but this is a war without end; a war that cannot be won. As long as Heaven and Hell remain you must be the gatekeeper, you must be the warrior, and the Awake will always be the casualties. Why should they suffer so that others can prosper? Why should you suffer for the sins of a vain god?"

"Sarah, I don't understand. You've always wanted to do good for others. To help them."

"I am helping them," she replied.

"How? Instead of outcasts they'll be slaves."

She shrugged. "Slaves or kings, it makes no difference. What they will be is equals. Accepted."

"In return for all of humanity?"

"No, brother. In return for so much more."

I looked right into her red-gold eyes. "So is that it? You want power? You want to be no better than your father?"

Her eyes swirled, the colors dancing and flaming into an angry

orange. “You know what he took from me, brother,” she said. “You know what he did. To my eyes, to my mind, to my soul. For what? To make me his pawn in this stupid game? To claim the power he doesn’t deserve? You remember what I said to you, don’t you, brother? They can’t win if you don’t play. Don’t play their game, and *we* can win. *We* can decide the fate of this world. *We* can make everything whole.”

My heart dropped, and I looked away. She was wrong, but I understood in that moment why she couldn’t see it. “We can’t make everything whole,” I said in a whisper. When I looked back a moment later, she was crying.

“Sarah, you don’t have to do this,” I said.

She reached up and rubbed her eyes. “Yes, I do. I’m sorry, brother. I want power. I need power. Once the new lord has risen it will be up to me to impose order. I’m the only one who can. That’s why he’s waited so long to begin his ascension. I’ve seen this future, and I know it to be true. Things will be difficult for a time, but they will get better.”

“Better for who?” I asked. “You’re part human. You know what that life is like - filled with opportunity, filled with hope, and laughter, and love. Is it fair to take that away from billions to feed a world where the only hope of avoiding chaos rests on your master’s ability to Command them?”

That’s what it was. Not a panacea of demons and seraphs frolicking carefree in the tulips together, but a single overload using an inordinate amount of power to keep the Divine in line. I was wrong about one thing though. It wasn’t the master who would be Commanding.

“There’s no way you can do it, and keep your sanity,” I said. “You’ll lose yourself. You’ll be no more than a puppet on a string.” She wouldn’t be Sarah. She’d be a conduit, a circuit. Nothing more.

“You can’t Command. You know nothing about it. With help, I can keep them all under control. I can keep them all at peace. You won’t have to fight anymore,” she said. “You can have your freedom, your free will. It’s been promised. All you have to do is join us.”

I looked down. I could feel the tears forming on the edges of my own eyes. She waited patiently while I tried to find the words that could change her mind. In the end, I knew there weren’t any.

“I’m sorry,” I said, looking up. “If you won’t stop this yourself,

I'm going to have to stop you. I won't let you do this, Sarah. Not to yourself, and not to the people I've promised to protect."

People like Javier, who deserved to live his dream. The name sparked in my mind, and my memories came flooding back. Rebecca, Zeek, the fire demon and the plane. That's why I was here. I had overused my power and nearly killed myself. Whatever subconscious strength I had that kept Sarah out of my head was gone, and she was able to get in. Had that been the goal of the attack? She wouldn't come just to try to recruit me, not when Rebecca had already tried and failed. There was something else she wanted.

I tried to move, but I was rooted firmly in place, my limbs solid bricks cemented to the floor. "What did you really come here for?" I asked her, my voice an angry shout.

She smiled, reached out and cupped my face in her hand. "Shhh. It's okay, brother. Relax. I won't hurt you. I don't want to hurt you. I wanted you to join us, so we could be a family - you and Rebecca and me. She loves you, you know. She has since the first time she saw you. I love you too. I couldn't have asked for a better protector, a better big brother."

While she was speaking, her hand slid up from my cheek towards my temple. I felt a heat and charge of energy below it when it came to rest.

"What are you doing?"

Her hand was getting warmer, and I began to get dizzy, my eyes shuddering open and closed and my life playing through like a bad movie. The images danced around me, my first birthday party, my father before he died, the school play. She was Googling my existence.

I closed my eyes tight, and tried to fight against it. She wanted something, something I knew. There was nothing in my lifetime that she could possibly need, but there was one memory that came after. She wanted to know where I had hid the Grail.

"It's okay, brother," she cooed, using her power to Calm and removing my focus from her efforts. "I'm not going to…"

I heard her sharp intake of breath, and felt her hand fall away from my head. I opened my eyes and saw her on the floor in front of the bed, Ulnyx on top of her, trying to hold her down.

"What is it with you and women?" he growled, finding purchase on her wrists and pinning her to the floor.

Life returned to my body, and I started towards them. I would never have expected the demon to come to my aid.

"Let me go," Sarah said with complete calm.

Ulnyx stiffened, and then his hands dropped.

"Get off."

The Were was robotic, shifting and moving to a stand. Sarah pushed herself to her feet and looked at me. "Your pets can't help you, brother. You're too weak to control them better than I can."

"Sarah?"

Three heads turned at once. Josette was standing in front of the white light of my power, no less angelic in a simple white frock and bare feet. Her eyes were wet with a mixture of sadness and joy.

Sarah didn't move. "Do I know you?" she asked.

"Yes," Josette replied. "We've met before. A long time ago."

Sarah cast her eyes to the floor, trying to remember. Josette started walking towards her, eyes locked on her daughter, hands out to the side.

"I don't remember you," Sarah said, raising her head and meeting Josette's gaze. "You're so familiar to me, but I don't remember."

Josette smiled. "You were just an infant," she said. "I'm not surprised you don't remember me. But I remember you. I've never forgotten you, and I will never forget you."

She reached Sarah, putting her hand onto the girl's cheek. She was frozen, and I waited for the moment that she would find the commonality and make the connection, that she would know it was her mother standing right in front of her.

The moment came too soon. Sarah's eyes widened, and then narrowed, and she backed away. "No," she said. "You can't be." She looked at me. "Brother, tell me it isn't true. Tell me that my mother hasn't been right in front of me this entire time, and you've said nothing. Tell me you didn't kill her." Her voice rose to a shout, and the entire world around us shuddered in response to her pain.

"Sarah, wait," Josette said, reaching out again.

"No," Sarah screamed, still looking at me. "I trusted you. I believed in you. Why didn't you tell me? How could you do this?"

"Sarah, listen to me," Josette pleaded.

"No," she said, tears falling from her eyes. "I've seen so many things, but I never saw this. I never knew, and you never told me, and now I know why." She looked at Josette. "I'm sorry, mother."

She put up her hand, and Josette froze in place. Her attention returned to me, and I lowered my head.

“Sarah, I’m sorry,” I said. “I wanted to tell you.”

“Stop talking,” she Commanded, and the words were too powerful to disobey. “You had five years to explain. Five years to tell me how you absorbed my mother’s soul, to give me a reason and a way to understand. It doesn’t mean anything once you’re caught.

“I see things, Landon. Things that haunt my mortal dreams. Futures that may or may not come to pass, things that have been and may still be. In all of these futures you were there, and you took care of me. You looked out for me, and protected me from the darkness that threatens to envelop all of us. I believed in you, I loved you. I don’t know how I could have seen it all so wrong. You killed my mother, Landon, and I’m going to kill you.”

My body became frozen again, and it was just as well because the pain that echoed through me would have shaken it to dust. I should have told her from the beginning, but I always thought that either she already knew, or she would never have to know. It was a stupid thought, but being Divine didn’t mean being perfect.

Sarah stepped up to me and put her hand back on my temple. “First, I need something from you,” she said. “I was trying to do it without hurting you before. I hope it hurts like hell.”

It did. It hurt more than hell possibly could. Every second of my life expanded and contracted in an instant, every emotion magnified and intensified, altered and twisted into nothing but direct agony that rippled throughout my being. The world around us trembled, the walls cracking and crumbling, a horrible, awful howling of emptiness and hurt unlike any sound any sane creature could ever produce.

I knew when she found the memory, because it was the one instant when the pain stopped. For just the barest fraction of time she lifted her hand. “Thank you, brother,” she said with a hateful snarl. “Now, die.”

The pain returned, doubled upon itself, causing my frozen body to defy even Sarah’s commands and contort into a ball, leaving me fetal on ground that was rattling and shaking apart with every passing second. The howling intensified, a forlorn banshee wail that coated every molecule of my whole with distress.

Sarah’s eyes were wild, blinding in orange fury, her own face

mangled by her pain and anger. She poured it all into me, transferring it in a stream of power unlike anything I could comprehend. I lay on the floor, curled up in indescribable agony, just waiting for it to end.

The last thing I saw was Josette frozen in her own spot, a single tear tracing its way along her cheek and tumbling in slow motion to the floor.

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I was still screaming when I woke up, my voice hoarse from all of its efforts. Still weak, still cold and shivering as a result of my excess, I couldn't see right away. My eyes took in only a blurred vision of reality, lots of red and gold all around me, an arm reached out to my forehead, a face, black hair, a huge black blob of mass. The scream sputtered out into a cough, and another hand held out a glass of water.

"As mortal as you'll ever be," she said. "Try to relax and accept it. You'll heal faster that way."

I knew the voice. Charis. At least I had been right about something. I took the offered glass in a shaky hand, spilling some of it as I brought it to my lips. It felt like glass trailing down my throat. I coughed half of it back up.

"Easy," she said. "You've forgotten what it means to be alive. Your body doesn't know how to react."

My eyes were beginning to focus, and I could see a little more clearly. It was definitely Charis positioned next to me on the king sized bed, laying on her side in a sharp white suit with a red blouse

underneath. She smelled like fire and roses. I recognized Zeek now, standing at attention at the edge of the bed.

"What do you mean, alive?" I asked.

"Ezekial told me what happened, about how you flew. It was a gutsy move, but you knew the risk; although I guess you didn't understand the specifics. When you over-exert like that, your physical self loses its connection to your Divine self. For all intents, your body becomes mortal again. You feel cold, you tremble, you need to eat and drink. Remember what I told you would happen? You lost your sense of living, and now it's forcing itself back on you. It's a shock."

I tried the water again, with a little more success. "Why didn't you tell me more? About what would happen? About Rebecca?"

She smiled, a sad smile. "I would have, if I had known. There's so much we need to talk about, Landon. So much you need to know. Most importantly, I'm as human as you are. I make mistakes, I misjudge people, I put my trust into the wrong hands. It sounds like a punishment, but it makes us strong. It makes us unpredictable."

I couldn't argue with that. "What you did tell me, about the balance. I understand."

She nodded, and took her hand from my forehead. I missed its warmth immediately. "Lay back and rest while we talk." She turned to Zeek. "Zeek, you've done a commendable job getting him here. Why don't you go downstairs and get a bite to eat?"

The big man bowed. "Of course, M'lady," he said. "See you around, Landon. You owe me for that axe." He laughed his way out of the room. A moment later I heard a more distant door close.

"So you've found the texts?" she asked.

I laid back onto the softest pillow I had ever felt. "Most of them," I said. "I'm not really sure what they mean." I looked at her. "If you knew about them, why weren't you collecting them."

"If I had taken them, what would you have been searching for? I needed to know when you were ready, and to see what you would do. You're an amazement to me, Landon. It took me nearly two hundred years to reach the same point you're at today."

"You didn't have anyone to throw what you were back in your face, I guess," I said.

"No, I suppose not," she replied. "Believe me when I tell you, I think you had it easier in that regard."

“So now what? I’m still missing one of the strings. Everything else is useless without it.” I paused, thinking of what had just happened with Sarah. “Besides, that’s the least of my concerns right now.”

She shrugged. “I agree. The texts can wait. Tell me what was happening to you. Zeek carried you in here screaming. He said you’d been at it non-stop since before he brought you through the rift. I know something was attacking your mind.”

The thought of it still hurt. “What else do you know?”

“Rebecca returned from Hell stronger than I could have imagined any vampire to be,” she said. “At first, I thought she was just going to work on consolidating her power within her kind, but her actions have been… erratic. I found out she was working with Gervais, and that she had you in her sights. We’ve had Templars watching the archfiend for weeks. When you turned up in Paris, I kept Ezekiel tailing you at a safe distance. Everybody converged on the Eiffel Tower, and you know the rest.”

“So you don’t know about Sarah?” I asked.

She shook her head.”Who’s Sarah?”

“It’s a long story,” I said, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, trying to calm down. “The short version is that she’s the demon Gervais’ and the angel Josette’s daughter. She’s a true diuscrucis.”

Charis’ entire face changed, and every sense of her turned cold. “Tell me everything,” she said, her voice flat, scared.

I couldn’t stop my eyes from tearing up as I tried to put it to words. I told her about my relationship with Sarah, how we met in the sewers below New York, how I had cared for her at her mother’s request. I told her about what Gervais had said, and what Rebecca had told me. Finally, I told her about what she was doing to me, trying to kill me in anger over her mother. When I was done, she sat there in silence, her expression grim.

“I should have told her,” I said. “It was bad enough she was buying into Rebecca’s promises, but maybe I could have changed her mind. Now, there’s no way.”

Charis put her hand on my shoulder. “You did what you thought was right, what you thought you needed to do to keep her safe. We can’t always know the consequences, or whether they will come back to bite us later. We can only do the best we know how. If you did what you did out of love, there is no shame in the outcome, no

matter how much we might want it to be different."

"Except most of the time the decision doesn't have the fate of the world hanging on it," I said. "She thinks I betrayed her. She was angry before. I'm afraid of what she's going to do now."

"I know," she said, no longer talking to me, but some other invisible presence. "You warned me this could be the endgame. We couldn't have known, not this soon. Yes, I know. We should have been more careful."

She turned her attention back to me. "What's done is done, Landon. Be strong, and stay hopeful, because this isn't over yet," she said. "Ezekial got you to us on time, and Vilya was able to ward your mind. Sarah will be able to See you as soon as you leave the ward if she's looking, but she won't be able to get back in once your strength is returned."

She motioned upwards, and I noticed for the first time that I was laying in a round four-posted bed, with a huge, ornate canopy hanging over me, and tied back drapery flowing around us. The wood of the canopy was scarred with an intricate pattern of demonic runes. The sight brought me to understanding, and I sat back up to look into Charis' eyes. The maneuver was easier this time, my energy slowly returning.

"Vilya," I said, searching my counterpart. Her red eyes flared. "I should have realized sooner. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Charis said.

"There's more," I said. "It's already started. I'm sure you felt the balance shift too. Sarah's started Commanding angels."

"Three so far," Charis replied. "The three that attacked you. Rebecca summoned the fire demon. It was all part of their plan to weaken you."

"I know. We have to stop them."

"We can't," she said. "Not yet. You need to get your strength back, and then we need to prepare. You may have learned a lot in the last five years, but you're still raw. You've only scratched the surface of what a diuscrucis, even a second-hand version like us, is capable of."

She leaned forward, and kissed me lightly on the forehead. "Go to sleep for a while, and be at peace. I know you'd probably like to talk to your angel, but the wards will prevent any other soul from communicating with you. Don't worry though, I'm going to teach you how to speak with them, the way I speak with Vilya. I'll be

back in a few hours."

She smiled the warmest smile I've ever seen, and slid gracefully off the bed. I laid back down on the pillow, and then remembered something. "Charis," I said, causing her to come back to the bed.

"Yes?"

"My clothes. Can you grab my cell phone?"

"Landon, you should rest."

"I need to check on my friends. I'm not going to be able to rest until I do."

She nodded and made her way over to a massive ornate armoire resting against the wall. She opened the doors and pulled out my jacket, unfolding it and retrieving the phone. As she did, Avriel's Box tumbled to the ground.

Charis bent over and picked it up, looking at it in wonder. "Where did you get this?" she asked in a whisper. She turned it over in her hands, examining every surface.

"Rebecca tried to trap me with it."

Her head snapped towards me. "This prison already has inhabitants," she said.

I shook my head. "They've been paroled," I replied. "Avriel and the demon Abaddon. The last time I saw them they were in the sewers beneath Paris."

"She released them?"

"She needed the Box to catch me."

She held the Box in her hand and brought me my phone. "First things first, but a scourge like Abaddon can't be allowed to stay in this world for long. None of this will mean anything if he remains."

I had witnessed the demon's power. I didn't doubt it. "Agreed. Do you know how it works?"

"No, but I think I may know someone who does. Make your call, and go to sleep. I'll return soon. If you need anything, ring the bell on the nightstand. Ezekiel will hear it, no matter where he is."

I twisted my head so I could see the small golden bell on the nightstand. It was sitting in front of an ivory lamp.

"Where are we anyway?" I called out to Charis' retreating back.

"Thailand," she shouted back, and then she was gone.

I actually had two phone calls I wanted to make. I fought against a sudden overwhelming fatigue and navigated my way to my call log. I found the last number and dialed it again.

"Landon?" Lylyx asked, answering the phone on the first ring.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I said. “I was just checking in on you. Did you do like I asked?”

“We’re safe for now,” she said. “It took some work to get Izak away, and we barely made it out in time. A freaking army of demons stormed the gates about ten minutes after I talked to you. If it hadn’t been for Gervais I think we would have been toast.”

Wait… What? “What do you mean Gervais?”

“You shouldn’t be surprised, after what he did to Izak. It was only fair.”

“Izak branded him?”

“After he flayed him a few times and cleansed all of his scars. He made his own, with his brand at the center. I’ve never seen anything like it. He sent him out to fight them while we made our escape.”

She was right, I shouldn’t be surprised. “Lylyx, I need you and Izak to go back to New York. Find somewhere safe to hide, someplace far enough away from the city that Izak won’t be spotted. Just wait there, and I’ll find you when I can.”

Hopefully before Rebecca did, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. I didn’t want to move them closer to the oven, but I needed them to be ready for whatever might happen.

She hesitated. “Landon, are you sure it’s safe?”

There was no point in lying. “No,” I said. “It isn’t safe anywhere, but there’s strength in numbers. Just get there.”

I hung up the phone before she could say anything else, and considered Izak. The demon could be a huge problem if he decided to follow Sarah over to the dark side. I would have to put my faith on his love for Josette being greater than his love for her offspring. Nothing felt safe about that bet, but I was hanging onto the memory of him resting his head in Josette’s lap.

One more call to make. I pulled up my contact list and hit the call button.

“Ben’s crematory,” the voice on the other end said. “You kill ‘em, we grill ‘em.”

“Bad time for fire jokes,” I said.

“Sorry, man,” Obi said. “Hey, you sound like crap.”

“I feel like crap,” I said. “I’m getting my ass kicked out here, so please tell me you have something.”

“I’m working on it,” he replied. “I do have Thomas here though, and his initiate, Melanie.”

“Melody!” I heard her shout through the phone.

“Melody, right. We’ve been poring through the stuff you had in your trunk. Thomas thinks he knows what you’re missing. You’re never going to guess what it is.”

It was the way he said it that clued me in. That and the fact that the angel knew what I was missing. “The Bible,” I said. I should have known.

“Wow, I didn’t think you’d get that one. Yeah, but not just a bible. *The* Bible. The first one, and I’m not talking about the first one penned by some monk somewhere, or written down by one of the prophets. We’re talking the original, written by the very first of God’s angels.”

“The first? As in?”

“Yeah, the Devil himself. According to Thomas, the Devil’s Bible is a rumor among the seraph, but he believes in it, and he’s sure your missing text is inside.”

“Why?”

“Hang on,” Obi said. I could hear the rustling as the phone was handed off.

“Landon?” It was Thomas.

“Thomas, why do you think the text is in Satan’s Bible?”

“The marker,” Thomas said. “Do you know what it means?”

“No. Do you?” I had spent hours trying to discover the meaning of the symbol that was left wherever a piece of text was found. I had never been able to determine its significance beyond the obvious.

“There has been talk for centuries among the seraph. Some call it a myth, some a fairy tale, some a rumor. Others believe it to be true. It is about the First Fallen, his Bible, and the mark of the beast. They say that while most mortals have interpreted the reference to the beast to mean Lucifer, the term has nothing to do with him at all. In fact, it is said that the mark is mentioned in his Bible, in reference to something else entirely, a creature with no name or identity that possesses the power to bring the downfall of all of God’s creations. To be honest, I never believed in it, until I opened your trunk and saw all of these marks for myself.”

I swallowed hard. “You’re telling me that the trail I’ve been following…”

“Is the mark of the Beast,” Thomas finished. “Yes, that’s my belief. My guess is that deciphering these texts will lead you right to

it."

The truth hit me hard. All of a sudden, I wanted to be ignorant again. Rebecca and Sarah were talking about a new lord, a new god who would overthrow the old one. A power that could destroy everything that had been created; the Beast. One whose whereabouts had been scattered across the world but tracked and kept safe by a collection of angels and demons alike. One who already had followers, including the Demon Queen and the world's only true diuscrucis. One whose location was likely known to at least two of those followers. There was a reason I hadn't been able to find the final text. I had a good idea who had it.

"Thomas," I said.

"Yes, Landon?"

"We're in pretty deep on this one. Rebecca is back from Hell. I think she plans on waking the Beast."

There was a long, tense pause. "Are you sure?" he asked, sounding as meek as I felt.

"Not completely, but it's a pretty safe assumption. I met with her over dinner, and she tried to recruit me to their new world order. She was talking about replacing God."

"I've got to go," Thomas said. "I have to tell the others, and send a message to the archangels."

"Thomas, wait," I said. "You can't tell anyone else. I don't know who we can trust. To be honest, I'm taking a risk trusting you."

Another pause. "I understand. You can trust me, Landon. There's a reason the Lord brought us together. There's a reason Josette sacrificed herself to you. I will follow you in this."

There was no lie, no deception. "I know," I said. "Tell Obi that he needs to find Rebecca, but he has to do it without ruffling any feathers. I know she's been using cell phones to communicate, so tell him to start there. Stay with him, and do what you can to keep him safe. Do you trust Melody?"

"Of course," Thomas said, almost automatically. "Well… no, I can't say I do, not with what you've just said. But I also can't just walk away."

"You've got to keep an eye on her," I said. "And make sure she doesn't hear anything that could give us up to Rebecca."

"I will," Thomas said.

"Thank you, Thomas," I replied. "Can you put Obi back on?"

"Yes…"

My ears rang with the sound of gunfire through the receiver, the unmistakeable whoomph of the Desert Eagle unleashing silver fury. “We’ve got to get out of here,” came the shout through the line.

“Thomas,” I shouted, as loud as my tired lungs will allow. No response.

“They’re on the roof,” Melody screamed.

“Thomas,” I repeated. “If you can hear me, find Izak. He’ll be somewhere outside the city.”

“Come on,” Thomas yelled. “Obi, light it up and let’s go.”

I heard the clatter of the phone falling to the floor. I heard growling and more gunfire, and the crackle of flames. The texts. They had burned the texts. Without the strings, we wouldn’t be able to follow the mark. We wouldn’t be able to stop them from setting the Beast free.

Footsteps echoed in the receiver, along with muffled voices. I heard the floor creak, and the sound of someone lifting the phone.

“Landon, is that you?” Cho asked. “You’re missing all of the fun.”

I fought to get up, to move my body from my position in the bed. My limbs felt like lead, and my head began to spin.

“Landon, are you there?” he laughed.

“Laugh while you can,” I said, my menacing threat falling flat in a hoarse, croaky voice.

“Oh, I plan to,” he replied. “All the way to the end of your world, and the dawn of ours.”

The phone clicked. I tried to throw it across the room, but even that ended in failure. I fought to get up again, my body resisting every effort, my power useless in my current state. I couldn’t even scream in anguish and rage. I started reaching for the bell, but halfway there I realized it was hopeless. There was only one way to get back in the game, and that was to rest. My mind was racing a mile a minute, but as soon as I let my head go back to the pillow my physical fatigue overwhelmed me. I fell asleep instantly. A dreamless, empty sleep.

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Charis was there when I opened my eyes, sitting on the edge of the bed, watching my every movement. I must have been thrashing in my sleep, because I found myself face down, my body splayed out across the expanse of the mattress, the blankets thrown haphazardly around me. I knew by the draft that certain parts of me were bare, but I found that modesty didn't seem that important in front of her.

I closed my eyes again and reached for my power, finding comfort in the feeling of energy flowing into me with renewed vigor. I had been asleep for nearly twelve hours. It was way too long.

"How long have you been sitting there?" I asked, rolling over and sitting up. She had changed into a pair of yoga pants and a pink sports tank, her raven hair tied back in a single long ponytail.

"A few hours," she replied, reaching behind her back and tossing me my clothes. "Did you make your calls?"

The question made me remember. I could only hope that Thomas had heard the last thing I had said. I grabbed the clothes and jumped off the bed, out from under the wards for the first time.

“She can See me now?” I asked while I pulled on my pants and shirt. Charis was still watching me, her expression flat, but her eyes dancing along my outline.

“Yes,” she said. “If she is looking for you.”

I nodded. “I figured as much. Tell me about the Beast.”

I could tell she was surprised. “You didn’t know about that when I left,” she said.

“Phone call,” I said. “Look, Charis, I’d love to keep playing this game we’ve got going, because you’re so darn intriguing and super sexy, but my friends are out there, and they’ve got a big red ‘X’ painted on them. You have to get me up to speed in a hurry, because if you don’t they’re going to die, and I have a bad feeling that will only be the start.”

She smiled. “That’s the spirit. Much better than the first time you woke up.”

I recoiled. I had come out of it a little battered the last time. I don’t know if it was the renewed memory of what it was like to be human, or a general feeling of pissed off that was fueling me, but I had reached my limit of self-doubt and guilt. Charis had been right when she said I had done my best with Sarah. If she was going to be a brat about it, I was going to put her back in her place. Dante had put me in charge of protecting mankind from the bickering of the Divine. As far as I was concerned that extended to any Beast that could destroy, well, everything.

“I’m committed,” I said. “I assume you already were, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Follow me,” she said, slipping off the bed and walking towards the door. I trailed behind her. “Like I told you earlier, it took me a long time to catch on to the secret war… the *real* secret war. I spent years following Dante, listening to his advice, going along with his instructions. I didn’t question it, because I loved what I was. I loved the power that came with it.”

We exited out of the room into a small antechamber with an elevator. She pressed her palm against a flat part of the wall and the invisible doors slid open. We stepped inside, the doors closed, and the elevator began to plummet.

“I was a spy during my mortal life,” she continued. “I worked in espionage for King George during the American Revolutionary War. My role was to get in with the American Generals and convince them to share their secrets with me. I used everything at my

disposal; sex, violence, blackmail. I suppose that was what made me so balanced. I did a lot of questionable things, but my motives were always pure, my goals always honest. I was loyal to a fault."

"No offense," I said, "but the British lost."

She cast me a glare that was both amused and offended. "One can only do so much," she replied.

The elevator finally slowed to a stop, and the doors slid open. We were underground, in a long passageway that led out into the distance, too far to see what waited at the end. The corridor seemed as though it had been created by compressing the dirt outward in a way no machine could manage.

"You did this?" I asked.

"It took me a few weeks, but yes," she replied. "It's nothing you can't do. As I was saying, one day I was hunting an archdevil, one of the First's many offspring. He had decided to make a run on this world. I thought I had him in my sights, but he was a tricky one, with thousands of years of experience. I found myself trapped, my neck nearly severed. It would have only taken one little cut to end me."

"How did you get out?" I asked.

"The archdevil was strong, but he had been reckless. He had attracted the attention of the Templars. That they showed up when they did was pure luck, nothing more. That they surprised him enough to keep him from making the final cut was just as lucky. Sometimes, Landon, luck is the only thing that saves us. A millimeter here, a millisecond there. Yet, I'm still not sure that luck is random, or if it's engineered by something bigger."

"You're talking about God?"

"I was never a religious girl, even after going to Purgatory. I'm still not in favor of God's overall design, especially when it comes to the balance. I was going to die, and the Templars saved me. At the last possible moment they saved me. He saved me. Not God, the Templar, Joseph. I'd always used emotions to my benefit, a tool to meet my aims. It was the first time I truly fell in love."

I could hear the sadness in her voice. "I'm sorry," I said. I really was.

She stopped walking and looked at me. "I don't know why I told you that part. I feel like I can tell you anything."

At least it wasn't just me. "We're cut from the same cloth, aren't we?" I asked.

She tilted her head. “I’m not so sure,” she replied. “Maybe more of a mirror, like we’re reaching the exact same point from two completely opposite sides and reflecting one another.”

“Balance?”

“Yes.”

Our eyes caught for just a second, but so much passed between them in that short period of time. I felt a comfort I hadn’t known before, as though a missing piece of me had been put into place.

“So, the Templars weren’t created to protect the Grail,” I said, getting us moving forward again.

“They were, in part,” she said. “After Joseph saved me, he taught me about their history. He showed me his world, and I learned more about humanity, even my own humanity, than I had known even when I had been alive. I left my dreams of power behind, and took the oath of the Templars in secret.”

“Why in secret?”

“When Dante found out how I felt about Joseph, he had one of his little hissy fits. He tried to convince me that the Templars were servants of God, and needed to be held to the balance just like the angels. He warned me that if I kept up with Joseph it could only end in tragedy. They are servants of God, but it ends there. Unfortunately, he wasn’t completely wrong.”

She grew distant then, and I could feel the coldness run through me. We stopped walking and stood silently together while she made peace with the memory. I didn’t say anything until we starting walking again, but I knew what she was getting at. Everything was making so much more sense with every word she said.

“The Beast,” I said.

“Yes. The Templars were founded by the son of God and tasked with preventing the Beast from ever being given a new foothold in this world. In a sense, while you and I were charged with being the bodyguards of humanity, the Templars are the guards of everything.”

“It sounds like a tough job,” I said.

She laughed. “I know you’re making light of it, but it’s harder than you think, especially since nobody is supposed to know their true purpose. They have to fight demons as though they are no more than servants of the seraphim, while being careful not to throw their weight too hard and make waves with the likes of you and me.”

“Okay, so I assume that the Templars have been following this ‘Secret Society of the Beast’ for thousands of years, and that’s how you knew about all of the texts you had me going around and collecting?” She nodded. “You made sure to arrange our meeting five years ago so you could drop your hint about it, and start prepping me, because you knew you would need me one day?” Another nod. “And you didn’t clue me in before now because you wanted to be sure I would side with the Templars when the time came?” She nodded a third time. “And Dante can’t know any of this, because frankly, we can’t trust anybody right now?”

“One hundred percent,” she said. “To be honest, I wasn’t expecting much from you when I found out you had been chosen, but I have to say, I’m glad I blew you up.”

As stupid as it seemed, I was too. “About that,” I said. “According to Dante, you killed a lot of Templars that day.”

She sighed, her posture turning heavy, her eyes dropping to the ground. “We decided to put the Grail out into the public so that I could take it as the Demon Queen. The goal was to get it into possession of someone that both sides feared more than the Templars, without giving away my true identity. I was going to hold the Grail until a new diuscrucis entered the world, and I was expecting to do it for a long, long time. It was a surprise to me that you came along as soon as you did, but I felt it the moment you were brought into this world. I contacted Reyzl and started making the amulets, creating a situation that I knew Dante would throw you into. The rest was just a little bit of luck and a lot of hope.”

When she looked up, her expression was fierce, proud, and infinitely sad. “My involvement with the Templars is secret, and had to remain secret. I couldn’t have convinced anyone otherwise without their sacrifice. The Templars have pledged their lives to this, Landon. They know what failure means.”

“I’m not judging you,” I said, reaching out and putting my hand on her shoulder. “We do what we think is right, don’t we?”

She surprised me, turning into my reach and wrapping her arms around me. She buried her head in my neck, and I could feel the wetness of her silent tears against it as I finished the embrace. Holding her while she cried, I could only hope that hadn’t been the day Joseph had died.

I gave her a few minutes to mourn, and I hated to force her back to the present, but time wasn’t on our side. “Come on, Charis,” I

said. “We have work to do.”

She pulled away and looked up at me, her red eyes flaring. “She likes you too,” she said, her entire demeanor changing. “Let’s go.”

We reached the end of the corridor. I found myself standing in front of a small wooden door that looked completely out of place down here. It was old, it had to be, the wood stained and faded, pieces of it chipped and cracked. It reminded me of the giant door at the Catskill Sanctuary, only at a much smaller scale. It too was covered in runes, similar to those of the seraphim, but with a flourish and tightness that made it illegible to me.

“Templar script,” she explained. “It’s very similar in style because its origin is closely related. The power is what really differentiates.” She flicked her eyes at the door, and it swung open without a sound.

She motioned me in, and I moved ahead, stepping through the doorway. I found myself in a place that betrayed all sense of time and space. A cave, with uneven surfaces, stalagmites dripping from the ceiling, and veins of crystals catching the small amount of light and reflecting it in iridescent shimmers. It was beautiful to behold, but what made the space truly amazing was the Templar script. It covered every available centimeter of the ceiling, walls, and floor, tightly wound in a pattern of order and chaos that defied all understanding. It ran everywhere I put my eyes, and I beheld it in wonder as one of the most complete and amazing works of art I had ever seen.

“What is this place?” I asked.

Charis pulled the door closed behind us. As soon as she did, the network of runes began to glow softly, the light reflecting from the crystals, the resulting vision taking the room from unbelievable, to mind-blowing. When I turned around, the door was gone.

“Somewhere else,” she said. “A place outside of all things. A place beyond. Science might call it a pocket universe, or maybe a fractal dimension. Neither of those things is accurate, but they’ll suffice.”

“How?”

“This is the true inheritance of the Templars,” she said. “And of the faith. This is the cave where Jesus Christ was buried, and rose from the dead.”

I looked around, my upbringing creating more than a little shock, awe, reverence, and guilt. I didn’t feel like I belonged here.

“Shouldn’t this be near Jerusalem?” I asked.

“It was, once,” she replied. “I moved it. It left me in a coma for a week, but we felt it had been compromised.”

I kept turning, in circle after circle, trying to soak it all in. “Tell me more,” I said.

“Catholic teachings say that Christ was buried and rose on the third day, which is true enough. To any observer on the outside, only three days passed. But Jesus was the son of God, he couldn’t take the mortal path to Heaven. He also had some of the power of God, and bringing him here brought him closer to his Father. It was in this very spot where he learned to harness that power, to use it to return to his birthright. How long it took - weeks, months, years, millennia - is irrelevant. Time is irrelevant here. A hard concept to grasp, but one that we can use to our advantage.”

I put my fingers on the wall, feeling the power thrumming along the surface in smooth vibrations, like a well-tuned engine. “The runes. Who created them?”

“The second. An archangel named Malize.”

“I thought that was Michael.”

“Most do. Malize is the forgotten, and he prefers it that way.”

“That’s where you got the blood from?” I asked. “For the Grail?”

She nodded. “Yes. This is his home.”

“He isn’t here,” I said.

She smiled. “Remember, there is no time here, not the way you’re familiar with it. He has been here since the day he finished the final rune and connected this realm to ours. For us it has been many thousands of years. For him, either millions or the blink of an eye. He will experience it as he chooses.”

“Will we see him?” I asked.

“I don’t know. He will decide. We don’t have much time, not out there, but there are things you need to know, things we need to accomplish.”

“What kinds of things?”

“I told you I would help you communicate with your angel. That is part of it. There is more, but it would be impossible to explain.” She looked away, before she brought my eyes to hers. “I know I’m asking a lot, but I need you to put your complete trust in me.”

Trust? I stared at her. I had put my trust in Rebecca, and she had run away with it, all the way to Hell. Now I was trapped in another universe, and the former Demon Queen was asking me to

trust her? I looked into her red eyes, trying to find a hint of deception, a hint of insincerity. She was like me, she could lie all she wanted and I'd never know. How could I be sure she wasn't plotting to leave me here?

I had always felt a kinship to Charis, an understanding. We were so alike, yet so different. A mirror, she had said. Balance. Rebecca and Sarah were a serious tag-team. Nothing short of that would have even the smallest chance at stopping them. This wasn't just about learning to communicate with Josette and Ulnyx, I realized. This was about a union to create the balance that was demanded, because without it everything was already lost.

"I trust you," I said, making my decision. The words flowed from my lips like molasses, my experience of time suddenly fluctuating.

She moved in slow motion, her smile growing wide, her face set in resolve. The cave was small and we were already pretty close, but she moved in closer to that our chests were touching, and I could feel the heat of her body against my own. She was a little bit shorter than me, so she had to tilt her head up to keep eye contact.

"I promise I won't tell anyone," she said, her eyes sincere. I didn't know what she meant, but I had plenty of time to watch her tilt her head, lean up and forward, and press her forehead to mine.

I took a single breath, the inhale pulling in the warmth of her, the smell of her, the touch of her skin against mine. The exhale felt like it took forever, and it plunged me into a cold darkness, like a cannonball into a frozen river. In an instant I understood what was happening, and my first reaction was fear.

The darkness subsided, and I was a small girl standing on the street, watching a horse and carriage tumble by on a cobblestone road. My mum grabbed my hand and pulled me along, I was already late for lessons…

I was a teenager, at a fancy party arranged for the children of the upper crust. My dress was so tight I could barely breathe, but I moved with confidence, the belle of the ball, my beauty undeniable…

I was a young adult, in service to the King, laying unclothed in bed with a high-ranking American official. He was sleeping, and I rose quietly and went over to his desk to rifle through his possessions, in search of anything that could be of help to His Majesty…

I was laying on a table in a hospital, blood pouring from the

hole in my sternum where the musket ball had entered. I don't know why I tried to save the General from assassination - we weren't on the same side after all. Now I would pay with my life…

I was in Purgatory with Dante, and he was talking to me about the history of Purgatory, and about the role of balance in keeping mankind from the edge of oblivion. He told me I was special, and promised to teach me everything I would need to know to return to life as a champion to humanity…

I was in the midst of the American Civil War, fighting the demons that aimed to take the lives of the wounded in the night, and the angels that sought to save them…

I was trapped by an archdevil, my neck nearly severed, about to die. The door burst in an the most beautiful man I had ever seen stepped in, wielding a sword that seemed to make him immune to the devil's power. He cut the demon down, and set me free with a gentle hand that I would forever remember…

I was standing over the body of my love, ravaged by the archvampire and the now fallen angel who had worked together to lure him into an elaborate trap. I swore then that I would have my revenge…

I was struggling against the archfiend Reyzl, cursing him for his betrayal, fighting to remove the dagger he had planted in my back. I couldn't focus, couldn't breathe. I was powerless as he shoved me into the Hell Rift…

I was trapped in Hell, in a prison of bone and anguish, crying out in pain while my keeper methodically cut away at me, over and over again as I regenerated, the pain unbearable and unending…

I was laying broken on the floor, my bonds severed, my body feeling relief for the first time in ages. My captor stood over me, her dark face an empty mask of curiosity…

I was in her arms, and she was professing her love for me. She was begging me to take her soul, to escape this place before another could be sent to take her place. She said she was sorry she had hurt me, and she handed me a dagger. I asked her name. 'Vilya,' she said…

I was in the cave, alone, sitting prostrate on the floor, focusing on my breath, on letting go. I called her name, and heard her weeping. 'Are you sad,' I asked her. 'I have never been happier,' she said…

Trust. That was why Charis had required it. It was her life, and I

lived it, from the beginning to the present, every breath, every word, every feeling. I knew every instant of her existence as though it had been my own, from her greatest triumph to a trip to the bathroom with a bout of diarrhea.

Trust. She had lived my life too; every embarrassing moment of my own, every failure, every success. She knew me at least as well as I knew myself, and probably better. She had that perspective that I would never have, just as I did for her. It was a frightening, incredible experience that left me feeling more bare than any nakedness could, yet more fulfilled than I could have imagined. When her forehead separated from mine, and she moved back far enough to look into my eyes I could see myself reflected in them.

"I don't know what so say," I admitted, struggling to catch my breath. Such a deep understanding of another was a difficult thing to resolve. Knowing Charis, everything that made her who she was, and every decision she had made - I hesitated to call it love, but it was something like it.

"You don't need to say anything," she replied. "Focus, and tell me how you feel."

I did as she asked, reaching out for my power. I grasped it easily now, and so much more securely. I could almost visualize it in a corner of my mind, not only able to touch it, but also pick out individual fibers like strings. I could see the way Josette and Ulnyx's power entwined around my own, and with a thought I could begin to release them. As I did, I felt the clarity of their souls coming into focus, moving forward in my consciousness.

"Josette?" I whispered tentatively.

"*Landon* ," she replied, her voice clear in my soul. "*I can hear you. I can feel you. You've changed.* "

My eyes were open, still looking at Charis, but I could see her in my mind, standing against a blazing white backdrop. I sharpened my focus, pulling Ulnyx forward.

"*Sucker* ," he said, materializing next to Josette. "*Are you sure you want to give me so much control?* "

That was the trick. In order to communicate with them, I had to extract them, at least in part. The more I let them go, the more will they could exert upon their surroundings, upon my soul.

"*Behave yourself, creature,* " Josette said, smiling at the Were.

He laughed and winked at her. "*Not a chance* ," he replied.

Satisfied, I returned my attention to Charis. "This is what he

wanted, isn't it?" I asked her. "Dante?"

"Yes. One diuscrucis is powerful, but adding a second and having them connect increases the output. It is because of our humanity, our unique strength that the other Divine don't possess. That was why I told you I needed you, and why we need each other if we are going to stop the Beast."

I nodded and delved into her eyes. "Vilya is a daughter of Belial," I said. "Yet she fell in love with you, and helped you escape."

"All creatures have the touch of God, and all creatures are capable of love," she said. "Love and hate are how the universe balances. Sometimes people confuse these words with good and evil, but they aren't the same, and they are all subjective. Her love saved me to be here with you now. What the effects of that decision will remain to be discovered, but it has no doubt altered the course of all time."

I knew it was true, and I had seen it before with Izak. "But that means…"

She put a finger to my lips. "I know what you're thinking, Landon, and it may be true. It also may not."

It was a weak hope to pin the future of everything on. "Then I guess there's only one thing left to do."

"Fight," she said.

"Fight," I agreed.

"You may want to know what you are fighting," the soft voice said from behind me.

Charis and I turned as one to greet the archangel. He was a slight young man with dark olive skin and shiny black hair, a sharp, pointed nose and deep-set, dark eyes. He was wearing a simple black cassock sashed with a rope belt, and a sword hung from his hip. He regarded us with interest and curiosity.

"Malize, the time has come," Charis said. "The Pure One walks, and the servants seek to free the Beast."

He didn't look surprised, maintaining his soft calm. "It is sooner than I had expected, but we knew this day would come. No secret can be contained for all time. Still, it is only a fool who goes into battle without knowing their enemy, and so I shall tell you what I can."

He turned his back to us and waved his hand, and we were transported in this universe to a world newly born, covered in

verdant green but devoid of any other life.

"There was a time before time," he said. "When this world was newly created, and mankind did not yet exist. My Lord looked down on what he had wrought with pleasure, for He knew how good it would come to be. There were no angels then, nor man, nor beast. Only the promise of life, and His love.

"He began to lay the seeds of humanity, bringing life to this realm; the creatures of the sea and the land and the sky. He prepared this world, stocked it for those He would create in His likeness, to bestow His love upon them and to follow His own nature as a creator. The world was young, but it was vibrant, and He was very pleased indeed."

The scene changed, to dark skies filled with smoke and clouds, and fires raging as far as I could see.

"There would have never been a need for the seraph, if it hadn't been for the Beast," he said. "Perhaps even Lucifer would still call us brother." He shook his head sadly. "It matters little. At one time, there was no Beast, and then there was. It saw what my Lord had created, and it was intent on destroying it, for that is its nature."

"Where did it come from?" I asked.

"Another place," he said. "Perhaps like this one. My Lord is the Lord of all things, but there are an infinite number of all things, and as such he cannot keep a constant watch on them. It has been said that it revealed itself to Him and begged Him for amnesty and protection; that it had been exiled from this other place for attempting to defend the name of the Lord. It claimed that others like it, but calling themselves the true gods would follow after were it not hidden.

"My Lord, His heart filled with mercy granted its request. He allowed the Beast to settle in your world, to hide under His wing. Ages passed and all was good, until one day this realm began to burn, and the Beast rose up to challenge Him."

The scene changed again, now showing Malize and another seraph, an incredible figure of beauty and light, dressed in golden armor, their wings spread in magnificent white glory, standing before a dark figure. It didn't really resemble a beast. It looked like a man, but even in the recreation of the history I could feel the coldness and despair.

"We were the first of the seraph, Lucifer and me. We met the Beast in battle, and we lost. Other seraph were made, and in time

we had an army. We marched on the Beast, but it had created its own army from the remains of the dead, and again we lost. As we died, its power grew, using our casualties as soldiers, feeding off the destruction of the world. We were nearly helpless against it."

This wasn't making me feel any better. "You trapped it," I said.

He nodded. "Yes, but it required a new way of thinking. When my Lord would grant His power to us, the Beast would know, and it would grow its own, such that we would fall against it. So we devised a new weapon - a language. A special language that could siphon its power too quickly for it to adjust. This was the Templar script, the first language from which the scripture of the seraph is derived, and the runes of the demons derived from that. This was to be our path to victory."

Now we saw the battle. We watched as legions of angels fought against legions of the dead, knitted together in haphazard fashion, a grotesque motley of flesh and bone.

"There were thousands of us against it. We accepted the casualties, we accepted the loss. We moved in, Lucifer and I, getting past its armies and confronting it one final time. Lucifer tricked it into chasing him, and led it straight into a trap. A cage of words, symbols, and numbers, not unlike this cave, where my Lord's power overwhelmed it and held it in His grasp. There it has remained, trapped for all of eternity."

A final image of the Beast, curled up on the floor, quaking in fear, surrounded by light. I shivered, chilled by the visage.

"Time passed. Lucifer sought to record the history of the seraph, and so he created the angelic scripture and wrote the first book, that of the origins of the angels. In his book he included the symbol that the Beast had given as its name; to serve as a warning so that we would never forget all that we had nearly lost."

"Satan's Bible," I said.

"That is what they are calling it?" he asked. "The scroll was lost when Lucifer was cast out. They have said it fell to the mortal realm, and there it must remain."

"The servants of the Beast have used Lucifer's words to encrypt their own," Charis said. "They may have located its cage, but without the Bible, we cannot follow."

"The Pure One," I said. "You're referring to Sarah. Where does she fit in?"

"There is only one way to open the cage," Malize replied. "One

who is mortal, who possesses the power of both the Lord and the First Fallen must spill their life's blood into His cup, which must then be emptied into the seal. Know this now, if the seal is broken, it can not be replaced. It will take some time for the Beast to regain its former strength, but when it does, there is no soul on this world or any other that will be able to stop it."

"Their life's blood?" I asked. My own began to run cold. "You mean…"

"She must be destroyed for the Beast to escape," Malize said. "It feeds on destruction."

I looked at Charis, whose face had gone white. She hadn't known, or I would have already. "How much do you want to bet Sarah doesn't know?" I said. "They are betraying her too." I had no proof, but I was sure of it.

"Malize," Charis said. "How can the Grail be used to break the seal? It didn't exist when the cage was created."

The archangel shook his head. "It has always existed. It is made from the soul of the Lord made tangible, and was delivered to His son to aid him on his path to join his Father. The Lord's power holds the Beast, and only the Lord's power can release it."

Charis took my hand in hers. "Landon, it's time to go."

"Wait," I said. "I don't understand. If the Beast is such a threat to God, why would He make it at all possible for it to be freed?"

Malize said a single word in reply. The word I should have expected.

"Balance."

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“Landon, help me seal the tunnel,” Charis said. We had left Malize and the cave behind, the door returning to our vision through her focus. “We can’t afford for the Beast’s servants to find this place.”

“Right.” I focused on the rock above the tunnel, pulling at it, ordering it to expand and collapse. Charis brought it up from below, and together we buried the entrance in no time.

“Not enough,” Charis said. “That door leads to one of the most important artifacts in existence. We have to bring down the entire tunnel.”

“I see why you needed my help,” I replied.

We moved back along the corridor, pulling and lifting the rock down behind us, until there was just enough space left for the two of us to stand in front of the elevator doors.

“It’s going to be weird for anyone who comes down here,” I said. We had boarded the lift and finished filling in the tunnel, leaving the doors to open on a wall of rock.

“There shouldn’t be anyone else coming down here,” she replied.

We returned to the room at the top of the tower, and Charis called for Zeek while I tried to get a hold of Lylyx. The phone shunted directly to voicemail. It could have meant anything, so I tried not to worry about it.

I had lived through Charis' life in the cave, and although in my mind it had seemed as if over two hundred years had passed, in this universe it had been little more than thirty seconds. It was strange to be back where I had started so soon after I had left, yet having experienced and learned so much.

"We're going to save her," I said.

"*I know* ," Josette replied.

I smiled. I had always been able to feel her soul, to touch it and use its power. It was nothing compared to her actual presence. If anything could bring me comfort, it was her.

"Are you okay with this?" I asked. "I know what Charis did to you, to your fellows."

"*It is difficult, but I will accept it as His will, if you believe her actions were righteous.* "

She had done it in order to begin her pursuit of the Demon Queen title. Being sent to Hell hadn't been part of the plan, but it had worked out to her advantage.

"I wouldn't say righteous," I replied, uncertain that there wasn't another way she could have accomplished the same thing. "For whatever it's worth, her intent wasn't grounded in evil."

The door to the suite opened, and Charis walked in with the huge Templar trailing behind. She had a blessed sword across her back, and a cursed dagger at her side. She offered me the same.

"These belonged to Joseph," she said.

I knew it as soon as I took hold of them. I remembered the first time I had seen the simple longsword, stabbing into the chest of the archdevil. I accepted the blades in silent reverence, and altered my clothes to better accommodate them - combat boots, a pair of paratrooper pants, a black t-shirt, and a rig to hold the weapons.

"Don't lose them," Zeek added. He had a shotgun slung over each shoulder, and an axe that looked eerily similar to the first showing behind his head. A utility belt with boxes of shells attached to it caused his coat to bulge out at the sides.

"*Can't we just rip his throat out?* " Ulnyx said. "*It would be my pleasure.* "

I ignored the Were. "What about the rest of the Templars?" I

asked.

“They’re willing to die for this, of course,“ Charis said. “But we’re few enough in number. I’m not going to just throw away their lives.”

I nodded. I knew from her memories how much they had lost. “We have no way to track Rebecca and Sarah unless they reveal themselves,” I said. “We know they want the Grail, and we know they need Satan’s Bible. I think our best chance right now is to stop them before they can get the Chalice.”

“If they go after it first,” Zeek said.

“They will,” Charis replied. “They know that Landon knows they’re after it. They’ll want to get their hands on it before we can react. They have a huge head start though. I don’t know if we can catch up.”

I flashed her a sly smile. “Do you think I would make it that easy?” I asked. “They’ll get the Grail with enough time for sure, but hopefully we haven’t reached enough time yet.”

She reached back for the memory and returned my smile with one of her own. “You are a clever boy,” she said.

My face flushed at the compliment. “If we don’t catch them, we need to get to the Bible before they do, plus we’ll need Obi and Thomas if we’re going to have any hope of decrypting the strings.” I could only hope that they had known what they were doing when they had torched my collection.

“It’ll make it a whole lot easier if we can cut them off instead of chasing them,” Zeek said.

“I don’t know if ‘easier’ is the word I would use,” I replied. “But the Beast needs Sarah to get out, which means we need to get to Sarah first. If we fail at that, we find Obi and get the Bible.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Zeek agreed.

“The rift is on the rooftop,” Charis said. “I disabled it to prevent us from being followed, but Vilya and I can put it back together. It won’t take long.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

Charis bypassed the elevator and led us up to the roof via the emergency stairs. We emerged into a gray gloom and a stiff buffeting wind. The roof was large and flat, with a helipad in the center and a radio spire rising to the south. The transport rift was tucked into the space below the spire, hidden from view of the Divine by the physical obstruction.

“It will only take a few minutes,” Charis said when we approached. I could see that some of the runes had been scraped clean.

“Nothing to do but wait,” Zeek said.

I scanned the sky with my Sight, my hackles raised. If Sarah were keeping a lookout for me, she would know right where I was. Somehow she and Rebecca had managed to get the angels and fire demon on our tail mid-flight to our original Swiss destination - I didn’t doubt they could do the same, or worse, again.

The geography around us was clear, at least as far as I could tell. Someone in Hell had taught Rebecca how to make herself and others invisible to Sight. Someone who was clearly a servant, and clearly powerful; but who? Was there an even stronger enemy out there, just waiting in the wings in case she failed? If there was, with any luck they were trapped in Hell.

I felt the change in the transport rift before Charis had a chance to announce that it was ready. It was a strange sensation, like being tickled by the edge of a flame, and one that I hadn’t felt, or at least noticed before. A few seconds later the flames ignited around the circumference of the rift.

“Come on,” Charis said, motioning us through.

Zeek went first, a shotgun cradled in his arms, just in case. I didn’t hesitate to follow, finding my focus as I stepped in.

I was greeted by the strong smell of burned wood and the sight of a flamed out husk of a structure interspersed among the small army of Divine that greeted us on the other side. My Sight flared in response to the heat. A trap? Or just an obvious immersion point? Either way, we had just walked right into an ambush.

The first wave of demons had pounced the moment Zeek had appeared, but his initial salvo of holy water laden shells had managed to slow the advance. Even so, I found myself ducking and jiving out of the way of vampire claws even before I could pull my right foot all the way through. I dropped to a knee and whipped the sword from my back, planting it into the demon’s chest and using it to shove it away. The blade slid free through a cloud of smoke, but I watched it sizzle and heal over in a matter of seconds. Not good.

“Zeek,” I shouted, reaching out and grabbing the Templar before he could move too far from the rift. We had two choices, stay and fight or go back through. I was going to pull him back, but then Charis appeared and all hell really broke loose.

Her sword came to her hand like magic, flashing in the light of the rift and severing the claws that grabbed for her, circling back around and decapitating the first vampire that tried to touch her. She crouched low and kicked out, hitting a second vamp in the groin and launching him backward a good twenty feet.

"Come on, Landon," she spat, her eyes on fire. "It doesn't matter if they've been suckling from your girlfriend if you take their heads."

Her words hit me. I was stronger, faster, better than before, and I shouldn't be letting their healing factor psych me out. Renewed, I slipped around a shorter female and grabbed the dagger, using it to pin her while I took her head with the sword. Another vampire was coming at Zeek from behind, and I tossed the dagger into its forehead. The move only slowed it long enough for it to reach up and remove the blade, but that was all the time the Templar needed. His axe swung cleanly through the demon's neck.

"*You fight like a girl* ," Ulnyx growled from below the surface, his voice clear in my mind.

I felt him reach out, asking for control. I could see the threads of power now, and understand them. I knew I could keep him contained, and so I let him take it. His power poured into my body, his soul capturing a portion of my mind and beginning to issue commands. My body moved like a marionette, sheathing the blades, hands shifting to a nasty set of claws, reaching out and ripping the head from one of the demons. I observed through shared eyes, my heart beginning to beat wildly at the scene of the destruction the Were created.

No longer participating in my physical motion, I focused, reaching out to the splinters of wood around us, sending them airborne and planting them into the enemy masses. It didn't do much damage, but it was a distraction, and it gave Charis and Zeek time to dig in with their blades.

"*A little better* ," Ulnyx said, his gravel voice filled with bloodlust. "*I'm starting to like you, meat.* "

"*Then you'll love this,* " I said, shifting my focus downward. The ground began to tremble, and pointed berms of earth shot up below the feet of the demons, spearing them through the legs and groin. Ulnyx pounced on one, grabbing its head and twisting, taking pleasure in the crack of the separating spine.

I couldn't use my eyes, so I focused on my Sight, using it to find

Charis and Zeek both taking advantage of the chaos I had caused. I felt Charis' attention shift towards me, and a moment later a lance of heat reached through my body.

The pain was intense, and I recoiled, the lapse in concentration forcing Ulnyx from my nerve center, causing my body to revert to human form.

"*What the hell?* " he cried, at the same time I glared wildly at my counterpart. I saw her own expression turn to one of shock as she realized what I was thinking.

Before I could say anything, I caught the sickening stench of burned flesh, and I spun around. Lurching towards me was another vampire, charred from head to toe but healing fast. Without a second thought I pulled the dagger and brought it around, severing its skull in one smooth stroke. By the time I turned around again, Charis had moved on.

The enemy ranks were thinning, and it only took a few more defeats for them to break off the attack, the furthest edges of the army fading away into the darkness at a full run. The demons may have fed on Rebecca's blood and become harder to kill, but these weren't trained fighters, these were chafe, and they weren't all ready to lose their lives to the cause. The victory was a meek one. We'd routed the weakest soldiers, but we'd also given them a lot of information to take back to their master.

"Nice work," Zeek said, sidling up to me with his axe still in hand.

"*That sucked so hard* ," Ulnyx cursed, pushing against me, desperate to get back into the saddle. I felt the threads of my power and brought them around to wrap his up again. His voice faded from my consciousness, still kicking and screaming.

"*Thank you* ," Josette said. "*I was growing irritated with his whining.* "

I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"Landon, I'm sorry," Charis said, walking up and putting her hand on my shoulder. "I was only trying to protect you."

I put my hand on top of hers, holding it out between us. "It's okay," I said. "I know."

We lingered like that for a few heartbeats, and then she pulled away. "This group wasn't intended to win," she said.

"I know that too. Sarah could tell her when I arrived, but I bet she wanted to know *who* I arrived with. Do you think she knows

whose side you're on?"

Charis shrugged. "It doesn't matter. She does now."

"So, where to?" Zeek asked.

"St. Patrick's," Charis and I both said as one.

The rift had been located at an old warehouse on the Chelsea waterfront, a two and a half mile walk from the cathedral. It was a cool, calm morning; still early enough that the streets weren't too crowded with people, but late enough that the sun was beginning to peek above the horizon. We were running, the Templar keeping up remarkably well considering his bulk.

My thoughts had taken me back to the morning after the events at the Statue, and I related the history to Zeek while we ran. I had returned from the Island and had been wandering the streets of New York, my mind whizzing at a million miles per hour, my heart scalded by the outcome, the Holy Grail clutched in shaking fingers. I had been looking for a place to rest, some relief from the twist and pull of Ulnyx and Josette on my soul, a respite from the guilt and sadness. I had wandered back towards the Waldorf, and had landed on the steps of St. Patrick's.

It was there that I had collected myself for the first time, gaining a semblance of lucidity that had led to inspiration. It may have seemed counter-productive to have stashed the Holy Grail in a place like St. Patrick's Cathedral. After all, there was no other place in the Northern Hemisphere that shouted 'Heaven' as loudly as the structure. In that moment of verisimilitude, I realized that was what I could count on to keep it safe.

I had approached the door, but before I could enter I noticed the series of seraphim runes running along each edge of the archway, and I felt the power radiating off of them. I made an effort to step inside, but the pressure was overwhelming, and my body halted mid-step. I focused, pushing back against the runes, and tried again to no avail. This was no way in.

After circling the structure, trying every door, and enhancing my eyes in order to examine the frame of every window, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to enter. What was more, I knew from the experience with the demonic runes under the Statue that if the goal had only been to keep demons out, I would have felt the pressure but have been able to enter. The fact that I couldn't meant the scripture was blocking *all* Divine.

"But if you couldn't go in, how did you get the Grail inside?"

Zeek asked between huffs of air.

"I had to find someone else who could. A mortal." I had known exactly who to go to. A priest in a small church near the Belmont. The one who had given me the holy water to heal Josette. He knew enough about the Divine to accept my story, and while he had been less than thrilled to see me again, it hadn't taken too much effort to bring him around to my way of seeing things. I had helped him sneak into the building, and he had hid a glamoured Grail. I didn't know where, but he had promised that it would be safe, sure as he had seen a leprechaun.

"It was a good idea," Charis said. "The cathedrals were built for the mortal worship of God, free and safe from Divine intervention. It was also close enough for you to keep an eye on it, and sneaky enough that it would have taken quite a while for any Divine to figure it out. It isn't your fault Sarah ripped it out of you."

Literally. The choice of words brought the pain back. I winced and shook it off.

"I get that," Zeek said. "But how come they haven't gotten to it yet? Isn't Sarah a mortal?"

"Yes, but I couldn't tell her exactly where the Grail was, because I don't know. She's probably still in there, rooting through the Cardinal's drawers."

When we reached St. Patrick's, I found out how wrong I had been. The cathedral rested heavily in the morning sunlight, at first glance a peaceful vision of the strength and power of religion and faith. That was until my eyes settled lower on the structure, on the dozens of men and women who had fallen chaotically across the steps.

"*No* ," Josette cried out in my mind, sharply enough to force me to a knee.

Zeek knelt down beside one of the people, a young woman with long red hair. He put his hand to her neck and shook his head. "Dead," he said.

"They're all dead," Charis confirmed. "But they're still warm."

I got back to my feet and looked up. The door to the cathedral was hanging open, only silent darkness beyond. I fought back against the anger that was creeping up my spine, refusing to believe what I knew was true. I climbed the steps so that I could see inside.

Sunlight streamed in weakly through the stained glass windows, casting an eerie light on the ransacked interior of the church. Pews

had been thrown aside, the floor had been dug into, the statues smashed. It would have taken an army to do so much damage in so little time. An army that had been decommissioned once they were no longer needed. Still warm. We hadn't missed them by much.

"*How could she do this?* " Josette asked, her voice raw. "*I know Izak raised her with kindness. I know he would never have taught her this.* "

I could have kicked myself. She did it because she knew we were getting close; that her time was running out. We had been wasting our time fighting Rebecca's minions while she had Commanded regular men and women to go into the cathedral and find the Grail. Against their will she had made them defile the house of God until they found what she wanted. Once they had, she had killed them. Each and every one of them.

"How could they die?" Zeek asked. "There isn't a scratch on them."

"She was Commanding them," Charis said. "She probably told them to stop breathing."

The world started spinning, my emotions climbing their way back from the depths where I had learned to contain them. More and more they had been finding their way out, escaping the prison I had constructed to hold back the torture of loss and betrayal, but now they burst free in an explosion of guilt, anger, sadness, disappointment, and fear.

"Sarah," I shouted, focusing my energy on the word, casting it upwards into the sky and downwards into the dirt. The power of it was a shockwave that sent the air flowing out around me, pushing over the corpses and shaking the world. In my mind, I felt a recoil, a coolness that I hadn't noticed before. She had heard me, and fled.

"She has the Grail, and we don't know where they are, or where they're going," Zeek said.

Charis walked over and put her arms around me, pulling me down to bring her face level with mine. "Landon?"

I hadn't realized I was crying until I tried to look at her through tear-coated eyes. "I don't know if I can save her," I said in a whisper. "I don't know if I can kill her."

She cupped my face in her hand, her eyes fierce. "You can save her," she insisted. She looked down. "If you can't, I'll kill her. We can't let them free the Beast. I know you care for her, but she's still only one person."

“*Landon, she’s right* ,” Josette said, her words heavy. “*If she has lost her way and we cannot help her find it, there is no other choice. We cannot sacrifice everything.* ”

I took a deep breath and looked around at the bodies, taking in each face, remembering them all. This would be the fate of every man, woman, and child if the Beast were set loose. Used up and tossed away.

“They have the Grail. Let’s hope we can get to the Bible first,” I said. “Strength in numbers. We need to find Obi. I think I know how.”

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Rachel's office was downtown, but her home was on the upper west side, a huge brownstone that was mixed in with the residence of other popular New York dignitaries. I had stayed there for a couple of weeks a few years ago, living in the high class of a wealthy Manhattanite while I poured my heart out to her about everything and anything. I had hoped the exercise would have been cathartic, and she had done her best to listen and offer comfort, but in the end I had come away with the understanding that I was powerless against the true undercurrents of the Divine existence.

It was that realization that had started me down the path that Charis had shown me, so it seemed fitting that the same path had led me right back to Rachel's door. If only it could have been under better circumstances.

Rachel's housekeeper Celia was the one who answered it, pulling it open just enough to peek out at us. When she saw me, she smiled and opened the door the rest of the way.

"Landon," she said, coming out onto the steps and giving me a huge bear hug. Celia's build and attitude were more appropriate on

a linebacker, but she had the heart and soul to be anybody's grandmother. Her white hair was pulled back in a short ponytail, and she was dressed in a simple black maid's uniform. She had been with Rachel for over twenty years, and had been nothing but warm and kind to me, and to anyone I had ever seen her meet. Even though she was Awake, and knew exactly what I was. She told me that the way she saw it, the only way to end any disagreement was through kindness. I had tried picturing myself hugging a fire demon, and wished I could have agreed.

"You look like you haven't eaten in weeks," she said, pulling back and giving me the once over. Her eyes flicked over to Zeek and Charis. "Oh, you brought friends? Boy, I didn't think you had any friends." Her laugh was boisterous, and she gave each of them the same hug she had given me.

"What did your momma feed you?" she asked Zeek after releasing him. Her arms had barely gotten around the huge man's sides.

"Spinach," Zeek said, laughing.

"My, you are a looker," she said to Charis, the hug for her only slightly more gentle. "Mmmm, demon inside you, eh? I'll let it slide, since you're friends with my boy."

"I appreciate that," Charis said, uncomfortable with the woman's attention.

"Celia, the big one is Ezekiel, we call him Zeek. The pretty one is Charis," I said, introducing them. "I assume Rachel isn't here?"

She put her hands on her hips and glared at me. "You know full well she isn't here," she said. "When has she ever been here this time of day?"

I *had* known she wouldn't be there. As much as I wanted to, right now I didn't trust Rachel either. What I *did* trust was that her computer would be safeguarded from eavesdropping and tracking.

"Okay Celia," I said. "You figured me out. Actually, I was just hoping I could borrow Rachel's office for a few minutes. I promise I won't snoop around into anything I'm not supposed to."

She laughed. "Like anyone could stop you if you wanted to," she replied. "Go ahead, but I'm going to call Rachel and tell her you're here."

I had expected as much. "Of course. Charis, Zeek, if you wouldn't mind waiting downstairs with Celia?"

"I've got some fresh brewed iced tea," Celia said. "And I was just

baking cookies for my grandson's school fair, but I'm sure I can spare a few."

"Lead the way," Zeek said. "I could never say no to a cookie."

Celia brought them inside, through a simple marble-floored foyer and into the living room. Rachel's taste had always been understated. Instead of the crowded, ornate decorative taste shared by the wealthy, she had a standard sofa, love seat, recliner and ottoman, a painting of her parents, a fireplace, and not much else. The kitchen was to the right of the living room, and Celia led Charis and Zeek that way while I climbed the steps on the left side of the room.

The door to Rachel's office was locked, and I knew it was both protected by angelic scripture that would alert her to anyone entering, and under the watchful eyes of a number of hidden cameras. I figured Celia was probably dialing her right now, so I didn't hesitate to unlock the door and let myself in. I looked directly into one of the cameras and waved, and then focused on them, pinching off the flow of electricity and disabling them. I knew she would get on me about why I didn't want her to see what I was doing, but right now I didn't care.

Her office was standard fare, a near clone of the one downtown. I took a seat behind the desk and turned on her monitor. The computer was locked, but it just so happened that I knew the password. I had pulled it from the keys once when I had been here with Rachel. I typed it in, and then opened up a web browser. For all I knew, Obi hadn't gotten away from Cho, but if he had I could only assume he would have sent me a message. That meant SamChan.

I would have preferred to use a VPN and a darknet to visit the site, but I didn't have much time if Rachel decided to head home. She didn't know about SamChan. As far as I could tell none of the Divine did. It made it the perfect resource for secure communication.

My heart lurched in excitement when I saw the first message subject.

Don't cross the lane over the divider

It had been posted by Oblitrix, two hours ago. I knew it was meant for me. I clicked into it.

Friends don't let friends drive blind so txt me

The string was a code for the phone number. I pulled my cell out

and started typing.

"*Still kickn?* " I wrote.

The message came back a few seconds later. "*u bet. feelin advntrus?* "

"*y cu soon* "

I smiled and pocketed the phone, and then dug into Rachel's computer to clean out the history and the cache. It wouldn't stop any serious snooping into my activity, but it would at least cause it to take a few hours.

I was reaching for the power button on the monitor when I noticed the dead pixel. It was such a tiny, inconsequential thing that most people would never have seen it, and even if they had would never have given it a second thought. I wasn't most people, because I knew how fastidious Rachel was with keeping things in order, and so I did give it another look. Squinting, I tried to discern it with my eyes, but failing that I forced my will on it, examining the diodes that made up the pixels and looking for one that was unlit. There weren't any.

I stared at it for a few seconds, and then grabbed the mouse and navigated over to the tiny dot. I clicked on it. Nothing happened. I waited a few seconds, clicked again. No result. Almost satisfied, I started reaching for the power button again but then reconsidered. I double-clicked, and felt my pulse pick up the pace when a fresh window popped up.

Staring back at me from the monitor was an icon that was all too familiar. It was replaced a moment later by a login screen.

I slumped back into the chair, my mind reeling. Rachel was a servant? My pounding heart was breaking at the thought of her deceit. I had known her database had held a message that was intended for me to find, but I had trusted in her, and assumed it had been planted by someone else. Now.. Had she put it there herself?

What about the ambush I had interrupted? Was I as much of a fool as the witch had said I was? I had thought the demons were there to flex some muscle. What if the ambush was no ambush at all, but a meeting? Alyle had joined up with the angels to fight against me. What if it wasn't out of self-preservation, but because he was already working with them?

"*You've been punked,* " Ulnyx said, his rough voice in my head, pushing my confusion closer to rage. I closed my eyes and clenched my fists, trying to make some kind of sense of it.

"*Landon, wait, "* Josette said. "*You don't know that. She could be trying to help. Maybe she got her hands on some information, and she was going to share it with you. After all, she has been Touched for many years, and I know her well. "*

I took a deep breath and let my body relax. Josette had a point, and it helped extinguish some of the anger. I looked at the login screen. Maybe she *was* trying to help, and my dealings with the Divine had left me so jaded I wasn't able to see it. I leaned forward and started typing.

First, I tried Rachel's standard username and password combo; the same one that allowed access to the machine. Of course, it didn't work. Why would she use the same password for both anyway? I sat back down and stared at the login screen. What would she use?

My fingers flew along the keys as I put in as many possible passwords as I could think of. I tried her birthday, her parent's birthdays, and her anniversary. I tried her favorite author and her favorite book, the names of her deceased pets, and even my own name. I had software on my laptop that would have been able to brute force it in a matter of hours, but I wasn't so lucky here. Instead, I was taking stabs in the dark trying to guess the right key press combination.

At least twenty minutes had passed when I decided to give up. Time was in short supply, and we needed to go meet Obi. I could always bring him back here and set him on cracking the system if necessary. I typed in one last word, 'balance', and watched the red error text pop up yet again. It was worth a shot.

"Can I help you with something?"

I had been so involved with the computer, Rachel's voice caught me completely off guard. She was standing on the other side of the desk, hands on her hips, a stern expression on her face. When had she gotten here? My initial reaction was to push myself back from the desk and start to utter an apologetic explanation. I remembered what Josette had said and I tried to stay calm. Seeing her standing there, her posture accusing me; it didn't work. My emotions were too raw, and in the back of my mind I could hear Ulnyx calling me a sucker.

"Yes, you can," I said, pulling strength into my body and leaping across the desk. I had the demonic blade against her throat before she could react. "You can tell me the password to that little hidden

app you've got. You know which one I mean."

I had nearly shouted, and I could hear the chairs in the kitchen shifting downstairs. It was followed by a herd of footsteps, and a moment later Charis and Zeek stormed into the room, with Celia right behind.

"Landon, child, what are you doing?" Celia cried, shoving herself between the two Templars.

"Celia, stay back," I said, pushing the blade against Rachel's throat as tightly as I dared without breaking the skin. "I'm sorry, but she's been keeping some pretty major secrets, and I need her to tattle."

Zeek took hold of Celia's arm, keeping her in place. As strong as she was, she was no match for the massive Templar.

I pulled the dagger away and gave Rachel a soft shove towards the computer. "Put in the password," I said.

Rachel looked at me, fear and tears in her eyes. "Landon, wait. Please. It's not what you think. I'm not…"

I was hoping she would defend herself, and tell me I was wrong. Part of me was counting on it. Too bad she was lying. It only made me more angry.

"*Told you so* ," Ulnyx said. I came down on him like a vice, pushing him from my conscious stream.

"Not what I think?" I shouted. "Not what I think? What I think is that you're a servant of the Beast. Am I wrong? Tell me I am, and remember that you can't lie to me."

I could smell every bit of her fear. I could practically taste it on my tongue. She backed away from me, towards the chair behind the desk. She looked at the ground. "What are you doing here?" she asked me again.

"I came to borrow your computer," I said. "I was looking for Obi. I found more than I wanted to. Now answer the question, or I swear I'll put this dagger into your heart."

She flopped into the chair, her eyes downcast. "I'm sorry, Landon. I never wanted to hurt you."

She was telling the truth, at least as she believed it. "Then why?" I asked, my surfaced emotions bouncing chaotically. "You're a Touched; a shining example of what it means to be compassionate and giving and to walk the holy path. You were also like a mother to me. Why would you do this?"

I could see the tears drip from her eyes and land between her

legs, splashing on the leather of the chair. Her hands moved slowly to the keyboard, and she whispered between breaths. “It was no accident I was the one who took you in, after you defeated Reyzl,” she said.

What? My mind shot back to the day we had met. It had only been a few days, and I was still in a fog. She had found me walking the streets, I had never questioned how or why. We had started talking, and she invited me to dinner. No judgment, no anger, only compassion. Had it all been an act?

“I was supposed to keep an eye on you, and help you where I could without stepping over the line. The balance is very important to our work. You’re an easy person to care for, Landon. You have a strong soul. There was a time when I began to question what I was doing, because I had grown fond of you. Except, I thought when the time came you would join us. I thought you would go with Rebecca. She loves you, and the way you talked about her, I thought you cared for her too. Don’t you see, Landon? Everyone who cares the most about you - Rebecca, Sarah, and I; we want to set you free, to set everyone trapped in this stupid war free. This is the only way to do it.”

I walked around the desk so I could see the screen. She began typing in the password, one slow character at a time.

“You want me to believe you’re doing this for me?” I asked. She thought she was, which made me sick to my stomach. “How could you be, and believe it? You were a servant before you ever met me.”

I didn’t know if the last part was true, but she didn’t deny it. “None of us are free,” she replied. “We’ve been at war for thousands of years. We will *always* be at war. I used to believe that I could make a difference. I used to believe that God cared, and would help us win, so that the faithful could rise up and get the heaven that we deserve. I’ve realized that it’s never going to happen. The Beast *can* happen. Change *can* happen. I *am* doing this for you, and for me.” She pointed at Charis and Zeek. “I’m even doing it for them. The Templars think they’re so righteous. Maybe they just enjoy all of this war mongering?” She shrugged. “I don’t. I’m done. It will never, ever end, Landon. Is that what you want?

She finished typing, and moved her hand to hover over the enter key, waiting for my response. For the first time since Sarah had disappeared, I gave pause, and that pause led me to doubt. What if

she was right? I had been tired, empty, and emotionless. I had been acting on instinct, keeping the balance, and feeling nothing. I had sought out the mark, searched for it in hope of finding some kind of salvation. I looked up at Charis, her face a bunched mess of worry at my hesitation.

What if my path had led me here not to fight the Beast, but to help set him free? My emotions were a tangled nest that I couldn't sort. I looked back to Rachel, pleading with her eyes, begging me to listen to her reason. I couldn't deny I had been unhappy, drained by my position in the universe. What if I did free the Beast? What if it destroyed everything? I would be free from the prison I had put myself in. We would all be free of the constant battle, the so-called balance. Did it matter if everything else was gone too, if I wasn't around to know it?

My anger began to fade. I leaned in and kissed Rachel on the forehead. "Thank you," I said to her.

"Landon?" Charis said. I could feel her power building, preparing to fight me. I turned my head towards her.

"She's right," I said. "I don't want to always be at war. I don't want this to be my eternity. I need more than this."

Her power kept growing, but she didn't presume to unleash it. She had seen the essence of who I was, and so she held onto her own doubts. She was still unsure, because she could only know who I was when we had been in the cave. She didn't know who I was right now.

I put my hand on Rachel's chair and rolled her away from the computer. "If you care for me," I said, "tell me what's in the file." I could have opened it and found out for myself. That wasn't the point.

Rachel's eyes met mine, and she smiled sadly. "A list of the owners and locations of all the texts you collected. Each of them has been tasked with keeping the marks safe. I know you have the original sources, but the important passages have been transcribed. They've been digitally encrypted and spread throughout the internet, but the keepers have the keys. All except one. That one you can only get from one place."

"Lucifer's Bible?" I guessed.

She nodded. "The name of the servant who holds it is in the file, and only they know its location. Few of us have ever seen even that much."

“Why did you get to see it?”

“I had to have access, so I could show it to you if need be,” she said. “We’ve planned for everything.”

Charis’ eyes followed me closely as I moved over to the computer. Her power was still gathered, but I knew now she wouldn’t use it unless I moved on her first. It was a bad decision, because I was sure I could hit her faster. Not as hard, but faster. I had grown up since she had frozen me with a touch.

My finger found the enter key, and the app unlocked, opening up a spreadsheet that filled the entire screen.

“The Devil’s Bible is last,” she said.

I scanned the list as I scrolled. I recognized many of the names, and found others that I knew were replacements to torch-bearers I had been forced to kill. I didn’t rush down to the final entry, stalling a little bit for time while I continued to process everything I was learning. When I reached it, and read it, I wasn’t really surprised. It all seemed so natural, so fitting, so understandable.

“Landon, what does it say?” Zeek asked. All eyes were on me, waiting for me to do something.

I looked to Zeek, to Charis, to Celia, and then to Rachel. “It says we don’t know half as much as we think we do,” I replied. “But maybe that’s the point. Everyone has the freedom of choice, no matter what has been prescribed to them. We fight our own wars every day, and we decide our own outcomes. This existence may be imperfect, but it’s the variables that make it worth existing. With every passing moment things can change.”

In fact, they already had. Maybe we would always be at war. Maybe there was no satisfying all of the parties concerned. Then again, maybe there was. Maybe we had just grown too complacent with the status quo, and all it would take was someone to rock the boat a little bit. Maybe that someone would be me? One thing at a time.

Charis’ power began to fade as she relaxed her grip, heaving a deep sigh at my words. Rachel’s eyes locked onto mine, and I could feel her fear and sadness.

“You have a choice, right now,” I said. “Forget about everything that’s gone before. We can make a difference. You can make a difference. It can start right here.”

“I don’t, I can’t,” she replied. “It’s too late for me. I’ve already sworn myself to the Beast. I can’t escape it.” The tears were flowing

more freely now. “I’m sorry, Landon. I’m sorry I lied to you, and tricked you. It wasn’t supposed to be this way, but I’m just so tired.”

“The Beast is still caged,” I said. “I’ll protect you. Rachel…”

Before I could react, she shot forward, her hand reaching out and finding the handle of the cursed dagger. She pulled it, getting just enough metal to slice her other hand open. The veins of poison began spreading instantly.

“Celia, holy water?” I asked, frantic in the moment.

“No,” Rachel said. “Landon… the Beast… the cage… is imperfect.” She closed her eyes, the poison spreading quickly up her arm. It didn’t matter, because she was already gone. She had acted to take her own life, and had fallen, dead.

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“What did you do?” Celia cried, pulling her arm free and rushing around the desk. “Rachel?”

She bent down and put her hands on Rachel’s face, a face wracked with the pain of death and loss. I stood motionless, trying to come to terms with what she had done, and what she had said. ‘The cage is imperfect.’ What did it mean?

“You did this,” Celia said, turning on me. “You couldn’t just leave it alone. You couldn’t just use the computer and go. Why did you have to be so snoopy?” The anger fell from her, and she collapsed onto the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I said, kneeling down and putting my hand on Celia’s back. “I didn’t want her to die. I just wanted her to see the truth.”

“What truth?” Celia said through the sobs. “Folks don’t understand what they’re getting into when they sign up to fight a war. Folks never see themselves as a casualty.”

“*Just leave her* ,” Josette said. “*She needs her time to grieve, and you have work to do.* ”

She was right. I didn't say anything else. I stood up and headed for the door, averting my eyes from Charis and Zeek as I passed.

"First we get Obi, and then I have to go talk to someone," I said. "At least we got lucky with finding Satan's Bible." I didn't feel lucky. I remembered what Charis had said earlier, and it gave me chills.

"Landon?" Charis said, trying to touch my shoulder on the way by. I shook it off.

"Not now. Just give me a few minutes, okay?"

They followed me out of the room, downstairs and away from the house. My mind was still a whirlwind of thoughts and possibilities, and I didn't speak until we had walked a few blocks.

"Obi is at the Intrepid Museum," I said, not slowing or turning to look at them. "We go and pick him up, make sure he's safe, and then we move on."

"Landon, you know who the keeper of Satan's Bible is," Charis said. "We don't need to go to your friend. I'm pretty sure he can take of himself."

I stopped walking and turned on her. "I've already lost most of the people I care about over the last two days," I said. "I'm not going to leave him behind. Cho is sure to be looking for him, because it's likely he doesn't know who has the Bible and he still wants to keep us from getting it. He *does* know Obi and Thomas are our best shot."

"It won't matter if Rebecca and Sarah free the Beast," she said. "Every second we waste makes that even more likely. The Templars have the texts, we just need to get the Bible and go back to Thailand."

I put my face close to hers, feeling the flush of our anger intermingling. "Would you have left Joseph behind? Besides, I would think you'd be awfully keen to get a shot at Cho, after what he did to him." It was a cheap shot, and I knew I had gone too far. She reacted as though I had hit her in the gut.

"You son of a bitch," she growled, her spittle a coldness across my face. "How dare you?"

"Guys," Zeek said. "Let's just take a breather here."

I fought to reign myself in. This could have gotten out of hand in a hurry, and it was the last thing I wanted. "I dare because I need you," I said, my voice calm. "I need your help, and you need mine, and I'm going to the Intrepid Museum to collect Obi before Cho

does. You can come along and help, or you can hang out at Starbucks and wait. Either way, I'm going."

Her red eyes flared, but she smiled, her anger subsiding. "Okay," she said, leaning up on her toes to press her forehead against mine. "I do need you, and I trust you. If you hadn't found that hidden file, we'd be severely up the creek, instead of just treading water in it."

I returned her smile, keeping my head against hers. "Thanks for seeing it my way," I said. "I'm sorry for being an asshole."

"You're welcome, and I forgive you, asshole," she replied with a smirk.

"If it matters to either of you," Zeek said, "I'm in."

I didn't typically like to rely on cabs to get around the city, but we were on the upper east side, and the museum was to the midwest, resting on the Hudson. Our driver was a middle eastern man who drove with all the pizzazz of a legendary NYC cab driver, careening us through every back alley shortcut imaginable to get us to our destination in no time. There wasn't much room in the rear, with Zeek shoved into the first half of the back seat, and Charis and I sharing the other half between us. We were squeezed in pretty tight, so it wasn't all bad.

"Intrepid," the driver announced, tapping his meter. "Twelve seventy-five."

I reached into my pocket and found a twenty. "Keep the change," I said, handing it to him and pushing open the door. We spilled out onto the sidewalk.

The Intrepid towered above us, a hundred feet of American steel casting a long shadow on the seaport. I had been here once before, on a school field trip when I was a kid. It was my story about how I had wandered off into a restricted area and wound up getting booted off the ship that had probably given Obi the thought to meet up here.

I focused and reached forward with my Sight, in search of Obi's familiar signature. I found him near the center of the ship, towards the flight deck. Thomas and Melody were with him.

"Up there," I said, pointing. Charis nodded, she had Seen them too.

I looked around in search of any other Divine, not expecting to find anything. If Cho were here, he and his crew would be hiding themselves anyway, and we didn't have time to do a careful recon. I had nearly finished my sweep when Charis pointed off to a

restaurant across the street.

"Over there," she said. "It's small. A messenger, I think."

I followed her aim with my Sight, feeling the light touch of heat that gave the demon away. I recognized this one too. "Could be a problem," I said. "Wait here. Stay ready."

The people parted around me as I jogged across the street, not even trying to disguise my approach. When Yuli saw me, he waved.

"Good evening mastersss," he said, flapping his wings and bowing deeply in the air. "What bringsesss you to thisss part of the city?"

My relationship with Reyzl's former familiar could only be called interesting. After the events under the Statue, the demon had sought me out, offering me his services in exchange for an occasional bit of raw meat and the promise of my protection. I had taken him up on it, and his status in the city had been a great benefit to keeping tabs on all of the potential Reyzl replacements. That wasn't to say I trusted him though. I knew he would sell me out at the drop of a hat. If he was here, he already had.

"Just came to meet some friends," I said. "What are you doing here?"

His lips drew back from his snout in a wide, leering smile. "Justsss came to meetsss your friendsss," he said. "It'sss just businesss."

"Cho?" I asked.

"Yesss. He promisesss Yuli twice the meat, and a girl if I tellsss himsss when you arrivesss."

"Sounds like a good deal," I said. "Is he here yet?"

Yuli cackled. "Maybe. Maybe notsss." I reached out to grab him, but he swooped away with ridiculous quickness and started laughing. "Good luck. Call me if you needsss my servicesss again."

I didn't stand around to watch him fly away.

"Cho is on his way," I said, grabbing Charis' hand and pulling her behind me as I ran towards the Intrepid. "Obi doesn't stand a chance alone against him."

We burst up the ramp and onto the hanger deck. It was early enough that the museum was still pretty empty, with just a couple of local schools herding their students through the exhibits. I located the stairs up to the flight deck and focused, giving myself extra speed to sprint to the steps and glide up them. Charis was close behind, but Zeek just couldn't keep up.

I spotted them as soon as I exited the stairwell, all three standing near the front of the Blackbird spy plane, one of the prizes of the museum's collection. Melody saw me first, and she immediately grabbed Thomas and pointed my way.

"Landon, wait," Thomas shouted as I ran towards them. "It's a trap!"

I felt my body float into the air, vaguely aware of the heat and noise when the aircraft next to me exploded in a ball of flame. I heard the screams of the people scattered around the deck, smelled the sickly scent of cooked meat, and then landed perpendicular to my friends, face down on the smooth surface of the vessel. I knew by the pain that half my side had been ripped away, but I could already feel it healing.

Charis had been thrown by the blast too, and she shouted curses from somewhere behind me. I pushed myself up onto my hands and knees and tried to turn around, but before I could a thin wire dropped down over my head and tightened on my throat. I felt the serrated edges dig into my skin, and then I felt the wetness of blood running down my neck.

"It's so good to see you again, Landon," Cho said. He pulled on the wire so that I was forced to turn around to face him. He was still wearing that same fancy suit, clean and pressed and smelling like cologne. "It is especially wonderful of you to be so utterly predictable."

"What B-movie did you steal those lines from?" I asked.

He laughed, and then spun me so I could see Charis, similarly tied, along with a small army of vampires who didn't seem to mind the bright sunshine blasting them. Another benefit to feeding on my blood, I was sure. Zeek had also finally made it up the stairs, but he was powerless with both of us being held. He dropped his shotgun and surrendered without a fight.

"Now, I have to assume you wouldn't normally be so stupid and reckless to rush to your friend's aid without ensuring it wasn't a trap first, so I must conclude that you're in a bit of a hurry. Which means Rebecca has the Grail, and is on her way to meet our destiny."

There was no point in denying it. "She does," I admitted. "But it won't do her much good when she doesn't know where to take it."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," he said. He must have noticed my shocked expression, because he laughed again. "Ah, I guess you

weren't expecting that little tidbit. Not that it will do you any good in your current situation. I guess there's just one more loose end to tie up, and we can get on with changing the world."

He reached forward, sticking his hand in my left coat pocket, and then my right. "Where is it?" he asked.

"Where is what?"

"Avriel's Box," he hissed. "What did you do with it?"

I didn't have it. Charis did. "Sorry," I said. "If I had known you needed it, I would have brought it with me."

That smart-ass remark earned me a punch in the face, and the wire noose tightened enough to cut into my trachea. I could feel the blood pouring down my neck.

"No matter," he said. "I can adjust." He pulled me along with the noose, leading me to where Obi, Thomas, and Melody were standing. He motioned for his cronies to bring Charis and Zeek over too.

"Hey, boss," Obi said when we approached. "A little help?"

"I would love a little help, thanks," I said. He smiled. Even in the face of death, he kept his sense of humor. His eyes shifted to Charis.

"Man, you get all the hot girls," he said.

"She's hotter than you know," I replied.

"Enough," Cho said, tightening the noose even more, opening my neck wide enough that I couldn't get any air to speak. "Such a brave soldier," he said to Obi. "A joker right to the end." He reached behind me with his free hand, taking hold of the cursed dagger. He held it up to Obi's face, trying to get him to flinch.

"I'm not afraid of you, man," Obi said.

"You should be," Cho snapped. He took the dagger and jabbed. I winced at the pain as it sunk into my flesh. "Be a good man, and hold that for me while I drain your sidekick." He smiled, his eyes flashing black and his teeth elongating.

"Who, whoa, whoa, hang on one second," Obi said. "You can't suck my blood!"

Cho's laugh was throaty. "Why not?" he asked.

Obi glanced at me, and winked. "Because you don't have any teeth," he said.

I saw the glint of light reflecting off the dagger an instant before it smashed into Cho's face, shattering his jaw and teeth, the force of the throw dropping him and causing him to relinquish his hold on

the noose. I didn't waste any time getting my hands on it and pulling it off my head.

There was a flash of heat, and another explosion as a second plane went up in flames. The force blasted a couple of the vampires and threw us all to the ground. I was on my feet in an instant, and I rushed to Charis' side, decapitating her captor before he could get his hands back on her noose. I looked up at the ship's island just in time to see a Great Were make the thirty-foot leap to the deck, landing almost gracefully and charging a pair of vamps. They didn't stand a chance.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I whipped around, coming face to face with Izak. Where the hell had he been hiding? He greeted me with a feral grin, and then reached out and put his hand on the face of an incoming enemy. The vampire cried out as the flesh and bone rotted and collapsed below Izak's touch, leaving a disintegrating, headless corpse behind.

"An ambush of an ambush," I said. "I love it."

The flight deck erupted with the sounds of growling, and hissing, and the clang of steel against steel. These weren't the meat that had greeted us at the transport rift. These were the Beast's true soldiers.

"Landon, look out," Charis cried.

Izak and I both turned. The dagger cut deep into the fiend's neck, and the follow-up kick sent him tumbling away from me. I barely got my own sword up in time to block Cho's attack.

"She wanted you alive," he said, his blade and claws almost too quick to follow. He reached past my defenses and dug into my side. "Forget that. I want you dead."

I twisted away, taking him on from the side to reduce the size of his target, following the muscle memories that I had inherited from Josette. Cho came at me, his assault a frenzy of steel and bone, his mouth wide in a toothy leer. Josette was the best, but he was an archvampire, and he was fast, insanely fast. I struggled to keep up, until I couldn't anymore, and his blade sliced deep into my jaw, disabling one of my eyes and cutting off half my face.

I jumped back, landing a dozen feet away, and focused, trying to keep an eye on him through the blood and pain. His approach was intercepted by a jet engine, slamming into him and throwing him away. I focused again, healing myself and enhancing my strength, leaping to him in one step and bringing the sword down. Somehow,

he managed to wriggle just out of the path of the blade, and then the engine came up and hit me, sending me to the tarmac.

"I'm not just some prissy vampire," Cho said, getting back to his feet. I rolled and stood, facing off against him again. "I've been to Hell, just like Rebecca. I learned some things there too." He held his palm out, and a jet of hellfire erupted towards me. I had fractions of a second to try to evade the flames, and fractions weren't enough.

"Ullie!"

The cry came from my left, and I was shoved aside just in time, Lylyx's massive form taking the hit. She howled in pain, her fur catching fire. Her screams were torture, and she dropped to the deck engulfed. She was ash within seconds.

"*Noooooo* ," Ulnyx cried, his energy exploding with such strength that I couldn't hold onto him. His power overwhelmed me, furious and feral and unstoppable. My body changed and grew as he pulled me into his Great Were form.

"*Josette, help me* ," I said, trying to focus and regain control.

"*This one is mine* ," Ulnyx growled, his voice dripping with rage. "*Don't you dare take this from me.* "

I felt Josette in my soul, ready to challenge the Were. I gave her pause with a thought. "*Fine* ," I said. "*But you'd better win.* "

He roared, a massive sound that vibrated the steel we were standing on. Cho gazed at him, unconcerned. He crinkled his brow and put his hands forward, prepared to send another round of flame towards us.

Ulnyx was ready for it. He rolled to the side, bunching his hinds and pouncing. The move was fast, but Cho was faster, skipping away with ease. At least, he would have, but I used the opportunity to pull some of the spilled blood below his feet. He slipped on it, teetering over and landing on his back.

We turned on a dime and reached out, great claws raking the archvampire across the chest. He cursed his pain and shoved himself backward, sliding along the deck away from us. Ulnyx followed at a charge.

"*Ulnyx, wait* ," I cried, guessing the move before it came. A wall of fire sprouted up right in front of us, too close to avoid. We tumbled through it, the hell-birthed flames scalding us with intense pain. I focused, trying to heal it, or at least reduce the pain. Ulnyx didn't even seem to notice.

We rolled back to our feet in time to catch Cho's claws with our

own, our strength wrenching his arm back with a loud snap. The follow up nearly caught his neck, but he got the dagger up to block, and jabbed it into our hand. I couldn't hold back the scream when he kicked the burn on our chest and we flopped backward.

"*I said you better win* ," I shouted to the Were. The pain was making me dizzy, and I could feel my body dying.

"*Shut up* ," Ulnyx replied, forcing me back to my feet. We were set for round three, but it never came.

Charis landed between the archvampire and us, her sword alight in white flame, her body covered in blood. She was a blur of steel and flesh, stabbing, kicking, and spinning, launching her all out assault.

"*No! He's mine, bitch,* " Ulnyx cursed.

I knew what he would do in his bloodlust. I focused inward, finding the strands of his power and taking hold of them, pulling him back. He fought me, and in his anger and despair he might have won, but Josette added her power to my own, and together we pulled the demon from control. My body shifted immediately, reducing me back to my human form and leaving me weak on the ground, a huge burn across my midriff. Between that and Ulnyx's desperate efforts to regain my body, the pain was almost unbearable.

"Landon." Thomas was at my side. He rolled me onto my back and pulled a flask from the pocket of his pants. He spoke the beautiful language of the angels as he poured the holy water over the wound and the burn slowly began to heal. I wasn't going to die, so I turned my attention to Charis.

She and Cho were still locked in melee, but I could see the archvampire was losing. Even with the strength he had gained from my blood, even with his speed, he was struggling against the blinding light of the blessed sword. He cringed every time it came near, shying away from its brightness and losing the motion of the attack. He tried to defend himself with fire, spreading it across his body the way Reyzl had, giving Charis a small measure of pause.

The sword was immune though, and she was relentless against his defenses, each failed deflection opening a wound on the demon that shined with white light. He had a dozen scores on his arms, and he screamed in anger and agony while she pounded against him. Then, it was over. The blade made it past his arms and claws, digging in and cutting him open from chest to pelvis. The white

light was an infection spreading quickly across his body and reducing him to ash.

“That was for Joseph,” I heard her whisper, standing over the pile of dust. She spit on it, and then waved her arm. A sudden gust of wind scattered it off the side of the ship and out over the water. The white flame on the blade expanded out and vanished.

She rushed back over to where I lay, a satisfied smile creasing her face, her eyes moist. “Are you okay?” she asked me, leaning down and looking outward with a protective gaze.

I pushed myself to a sitting position, feeling the last of the burns fade away below the holy water. My strength returning, I focused on Ulnyx, smothering him with my power, ensuring he would stay buried and promising myself to work it out with him later.

“I will be, thanks to Thomas,” I said. I used my Sight, finding Izak, Obi, and Melody scattered on the other side of the deck. Where was Zeek? “Zeek?” I asked, feeling sick.

Charis shook her head. “He didn’t make it,” she said, fighting further tears. “He saved my life.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I’m sorry as well,” Thomas said.

“That thing with the sword, what was that?” I asked.

“The light of Heaven,” she replied. “This sword belonged to Malize. He traded with me long ago, but warned me not to use it except to fight against the Beast. He said the archangels would know if his blade had been used, and they would be watching. You already know what could happen if they were to decide to intervene here.”

A strange idea, Heaven watching us from above. I wasn’t quite ready for them to come down and start Armageddon yet.

“They’re all dead,” Obi reported. He and Melody approached together, the angel helping him support his weight.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

“It’s just a scratch,” Obi replied. “It’ll heal. Mel already treated it.” Mel? He looked at her with a big smile. The angel blushed and looked away. “Bastards destroyed my Eagle though.”

“I’m sure you can get another one. Izak!” I shouted the demon’s name when I saw him approach through the black smoke of the smoldering aircraft wreckage. His shirt was hanging in tatters, but he was otherwise unharmed. “So, will somebody explain what I missed?”

Obi gently extracted himself from Melody. “Cho showed up at the Belmont, looking for you, I think. Or maybe just looking for your books - he didn’t bother to say. Thomas here had already gone through the trouble of memorizing all of the important text, and he had Mel do the same in case he didn’t make it.”

“You can do that?” I asked him. He nodded. Impressive.

“Yeah, so we burned all the stuff in case he wanted it for himself, and we took off. His demon friends were chasing us, and man, I didn’t think we were going to get away, but then Mephistopheles over there shows up with another big nasty furball in tow and lays hellish waste to them.”

I tilted my head. “Whoa, hold up. What did you just call Izak?”

Obi looked at the fiend, who nodded. “Man, you didn’t know that Izak is Mephistopheles? Did you actually *read* any of those books?”

My head was spinning. I had only been interested in the mark. I *hadn’t* read the rest of the books.

“You had a text from the 12th century that translates to ‘A History of Devils,’”Thomas explained. “There was a sketch in there of the demon Mephisto that had a pretty uncanny likeness.”

“But isn’t Mephistopheles a direct servant of Lucifer?” Charis asked, looking at the fiend.

“He was,” Thomas said. “A very powerful, intelligent, and sly agent of the First Fallen. If you’re familiar with Faust, you have a good idea of his position in Hell. It’s not wholly accurate, but its close enough.”

I remembered the memory of Josette in her cell, with the fiend’s head resting in her lap. No wonder he reacted the way he did. He was an angel once, and couldn’t be redeemed by God. He had redeemed himself to me.

“*And me* ,” Josette said. “*No matter what he once was, he is not that thing today.* ” I could feel her heart burning for him, wishing for an end to his suffering, and joyous at his salvation.

“So, you returned to this world as an archfiend, until Gervais tricked you, and branded you?” I asked. He nodded. “He fell in love with Josette while she was being held captive, and then with Sarah. That’s why he’s here now, helping us. She saved him.”

“Yeah well, he saved me,” Obi said. “Heck, he saved all of us. Like I was saying, Cho had us dead to rights until he came along. After that, I told him where I was going to tell you to meet, and he

and Lylyx disappeared for a while. She said they'd gone to convince that little guy you work with to tell Cho where you would be. He and Lylyx made themselves scarce, and Cho came and collected us to use as bait. He never had a clue Yuli was double-crossing him."

"How much did you have to give him?" I asked the fiend.

He put his palms out and pushed up. A lot. Of course.

"Well, I'm glad you're with us," I said. "Who else knows who you really are?"

He pointed at us.

"Good. They know you're a badass, but they don't know how badass. We can use that to our advantage." I held out my hand. "In any case, it's nice to meet you, Mephistopheles."

Izak started to reach out for my hand, but then scowled and waved his hand. I could guess at the meaning.

"You prefer Izak?" I asked. He nodded. I could understand why. Once it had been a curse, a name given to him by his captor. Now it was a blessing, the name spoken by his savior.

"So, now what?" Charis asked. "We need to get the Bible and decrypt the message. Landon, you know who knows where it is."

I smiled. "I do, and it's time I paid him a visit," I said, closing my eyes. I focused on the energy flowing from Purgatory, taking hold of it and letting it pull me in.

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I found him sitting on a beach, the warm sun shining down on him, reflecting off his nearly bald head. He was wearing a pair of simple white linen pants rolled up to his knees, and he had his toes dug deep into the sand. His chest was bare, with a small patch of wispy white hair vibrating in the soft sea breeze.

"Satan's Bible?" I asked him as I approached. He didn't move from his position, or acknowledge me at all. He just sat there, staring out at the ocean. I took a seat next to him. "Dante?" Nothing. "You know what I'm talking about, don't you? A history of the angels, written in Lucifer's own hand?"

He still didn't move. He just stared out at the ocean. I leaned over so I could see his face more clearly. It was pained.

"Damn it, Dante, talk to me," I yelled. "I did everything you asked me to do. You owe me that much."

I watched his adam's apple slide down and back up. He licked his lips. "Signore," he said. "Mr. Ross has told me what is happening in your world. I have been sitting here for some time, waiting for you to return; trying to find some way to explain, and

some way to repent. But God doesn't hear me. Neither does Lucifer. Nobody hears me."

"I'm listening," I said, releasing my anger. There was no point to it.

He turned his head at last, but he wouldn't look me in the eye. "I don't know how familiar you are with the history of my life. There was a time when I was exiled from my home of Florence by the Black Guelphs. It was a very difficult time for me, and I spent many months fighting the injustice that had been done. In time, my goals brought me to the Tuscan city of Lucca. It was there that I met Gentucca."

He closed his eyes, remembering her. "As a mortal, I did not know it at the time, but she was a Turned. She had made a deal with a demon in exchange for great beauty in both the body and soul, and it was this beauty that lured me in. I fell in love with Gentucca, or at least I believed I had.

"One night as I was writing, she brought me a scroll. It was an old scroll, made of papyrus, but somehow untarnished and in perfect condition despite its age. She taught me to read its language, the language of the angels. She said her master had taught her to read it. She showed me the mark.

"She spoke to me of the injustice of the world. The suffering I had been through, and the suffering of others. I was a Godly man, and I argued against her words, refusing to believe in her twisted truths. That was the night that I left her."

He sighed deeply, picking up a handful of sand and letting it slide through his fingers, watching each grain trickle back to their place on the beach. "She planted a seed of doubt in my mind. I set upon learning all that I could about the Beast, and its servants. I traveled, seeking more proof, more texts, while at the same time desperately trying to restore my name and heritage and living a life of Godly piety.

"Then, one night while I was at my desk, a man came to me. He did not tell me his name, but he asked me if I would like to go on the journey of a lifetime. It was this night that I learned the truth about the Divine, this night that I was touched by the caretaker of Purgatory." He closed his eyes, thinking back on that moment. A moment he had described to me once before, under a completely different pretense. "It was this journey that became the foundation of my Comedy." He chuckled lightly. "Of course, I took some poetic

license, but I *did* meet God, or at the very least some part of Him. I asked Him about the mark, and about the Beast, but was denied."

"Who was the man?" I asked him. "Not Virgil."

He shook his head. "No, not Virgil. I do not know who he was, for he would give me no name. I have never seen or heard from him again. He was a powerful Divine, I know that for sure, to be able to travel to each of the realms."

I was curious, but it didn't really matter. "So you came back to the mortal world inspired to write the Divine Comedy. How did you wind up in control of Satan's Bible?"

"That is simple, signore," he said. "I stole it."

"What do you mean, you stole it?" I asked.

"I did not know it was Lucifer's Book when I took it," he said. "The night I left Gentucca, I packed the scroll with my belongings and left with it. As I said, she planted a seed, and the seed began to grow."

"They didn't come for you though," I pointed out. "They let you keep it. They let you protect it."

"They did after my visit to Heaven. After He refused to answer my questions about the Beast. After I learned about the balance, and His intentions for mankind. I was angry with Him. I wrote a letter to Gentucca, and told her I wanted to become a servant. It was the worst mistake I've ever made."

"Not the worst mistake," I said.

"I did not know what Sarah was, signore. You never told me. I did not know they would use her to free the Beast. I was a servant, it is true. Even after I died and came to this place I was a servant. I tried to go back to God. I begged for entry, to speak to Him of the balance, and of the Beast. He rejected me, refusing to grant me an audience. Even His son rejected me. For many years I believed that He did not care. Not about me, not about mankind, not about anything. I wanted to see Him be forced to care, to fight, to possibly die or lose all that He had created. It was a blackness in my soul.

"Yet the embers of that hatred cooled, and I no longer wished to see the Beast reborn. I focused my energies instead on protecting mankind, by searching for Charis, and then you, and by keeping the secret of the Bible locked with me here. You see, signore, if nobody could get the Bible, and nobody could get me, then the Beast could never be freed."

"I don't know how, but you must be lying to me," I said.

“Rebecca knows where to find the Beast. From what I understand, she and Sarah are on their way there right now. How would they know where to find it, if you didn’t tell them?”

He hung his head. “Yes, Mr. Ross has told me this. He is out seeking a way to stop them. But, signore, I do not lie to you. I have never lied to you. I have omitted things, and I have altered the sequence of things, but I have not lied. I never told Rebecca what was in the Bible, and she could not have discovered it for herself.”

“You have lied,” I insisted, growing frustrated. “You told me Mephistopheles’ Collectors had come for me, the day we met. They tried to decapitate me right in front of you. I just met Mephistopheles. Actually, I’ve known him for a while under a different name. He’s been in the mortal realm for at least three hundred years.”

“Yet I knew them best as his Collectors,” he replied, getting angry. “No matter what they were when they appeared, that is how I identified them. You think things that are truths are lies because you do not understand them, but there are many ways to lie, and many ways to not lie. Such a power is useful, but it is not all encompassing. I did not tell Rebecca where to find the Bible, and I did not tell her what it contained.”

“Then how?” I asked, backing down. “How could she know where to go?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, signore. I do not know.”

“I need the Bible,” I said. “I need it fast, or the Beast is going to escape.”

“It will do you no good without the rest of the texts,” he replied, defeated.

“I have the texts. I’ve been collecting them for the last three years. Tell me where to find the Bible.”

He seemed surprised, but pleased. His whole woe-is-me demeanor changed, and he sprang to his feet. “Then there is still time?” he asked.

“If we hurry. Where is it?” I asked again.

He laughed. “Where do you find any book, signore? You go to the library.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The library, signore. It’s a place where they have many books. The Devil’s Bible is sitting on a shelf at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.”

Hiding in plain site. I should have known. “Wouldn’t a scroll stand out a bit?”

“It was a scroll then,” he said. “It isn’t a scroll now. It is glamoured to look like a United States income tax law book. I placed the glamour myself with the full power of Purgatory. It is invisible to others, mortal or Divine.”

Again, I wondered how Rebecca knew where to go. Had she somehow found the Bible without Dante’s knowledge?

“Okay,” I said. “I’m in New York right now, but I should be able to get to D.C pretty quickly, as long as Charis has a rift handy. Once I’m there I’ll come get you, and you can show us which book it is.”

His face turned more pale than it already was. “Wait, signore. Did you just say Charis?”

I had, without thinking anything of it, but Dante thought she was dead. Or did he? Truth and the truth were two different things. “Yes. She isn’t dead, you know.”

“I know,” he said. “But she has abandoned the balance, and fights for Hell. You know what she did to get the Grail. How can we be sure she isn’t a servant?”

It took me a few heartbeats to decide how much to tell him. Charis had warned me not to trust him too far, and with all of his sly manipulations of truth, and the fact that he had never bothered to mention his involvement with the Beast, I was inclined to agree.

“I’m sure she isn’t,” I said. “We connected.”

His eyes widened. I could sense the storm of his anger growing behind them, but for once he managed to hold it at bay. “You connected?”

“I thought you would be happy about that. Isn’t that what you wanted the diuscrucis to become?”

“There was a time when I did. A time when I had put my faith in her.” He put his hand on his chin and looked thoughtful. “Perhaps this is good news after all. She abandoned the balance, but maybe you can bring her back to it. She is helping you to stop the Beast?”

“Yes.”

“It will be interesting to see her again,” he said. “We did not part on good terms.”

I was sure they didn’t. I put my hand on the poet’s shoulder. “We’ve all made mistakes,” I said. “But we need to drop all the crap for now and just deal with the Beast. You two can have a heart-to-heart, or rip each other apart, or whatever later.”

He nodded. “Of course, you are right, signore.” He changed then, his bare chest and linen pants replaced with a black t-shirt and combat fatigues. He looked like a skinny, old Rambo. “Only one change. You don’t need a rift to get to Washington. I will take you there.”

He had transported me before, but only a few blocks. This was a bit further. “You can do that?”

“It will not be easy for me, and it will put a strain on the equilibrium of our realms, but I can take you. Desperate times, signore.”

“Can you take others too? I don’t have the texts myself. The angel Thomas has them in his head.”

He didn’t look happy about that piece of information. He sighed. “I can only take those who are pledged to Purgatory. I’m sorry.”

“What about if you bring me there, we grab the Bible, and you bring me back?”

He shook his head. “No. It cannot be moved out of the mortal realm. You can’t imagine how much time and effort it took for me to get it to its hiding place this way.”

“Then I guess we’re back to plan A,” I said. “It will take more time, but hopefully we’ll be fast enough. I’ll be in touch.”

Before I could leave, he reached out and put his arms around me, squeezing me in a fatherly embrace.

“Good luck, signore,” he said.

I didn’t hug him back. Instead, I let go of my hold on Purgatory, and allowed my soul to travel the path back to my physical form.

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“The Library of Congress?” Charis asked. “Are you serious?”

“That’s what he said,” I replied. “We need to get to D.C, and we need to get there fast.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. I started to reply, but I realized she wasn’t talking to me. “Then there is no other way? Okay.” She looked at me. “The closest rift is the one we came through earlier, but neither Vilya or I know of any near Washington. The best we can do is Virginia.”

“That’s a little closer at least,” Obi said. “Only a couple of hours.”

“Right now a couple of hours is a long time,” I said. “Dante offered to give me a lift, but the Bible is useless without the rest of the texts.”

“So let him take me,” Thomas said. “I can match the strings.”

“Can you decrypt them?” Obi asked. The angel shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “He can’t take angels. Come on, we need to get to the rift.”

I made my way past the gang, headed for the stairs. I could hear

the fire engines in the distance, finally reacting to the mess we had made. With so many Divine clustered so close, there hadn't been any people up on the flight deck, so at least the damage had been limited to machinery. I'd kind of had my fill of causing innocent people to die.

"Landon, wait." Thomas rushed up to me and grabbed my arm. I turned around to face him. I knew what he wanted by his tentative but excited expression.

"No, Thomas," I said. "No way."

"Come on," he said. "We both know I'm not very good as an angel. I've been pushing the boundaries since I met you, and this is my chance to really do something good, not just for the faithful, but for all of mankind. Heck, for all of us Divine too."

"I can't," I said. "Not because you feel pressured. You'll regret it in the end."

"*I've never regretted it* ," Josette said, making herself known in my mind.

"*You didn't have a choice* ," I reminded her.

"I won't regret it," Thomas said. "I'm not cut out for this. I thought I was, but I just can't follow the rules the way they are, just so black and white, and I don't have my brother around to keep me in line. I mean, I was supposed to be mentoring Melody. Instead I've dragged her into your world, and now she's making eyes at Obi. You saw her at the airport. She was so enthusiastic about the rules that Mephi… Izak nearly fried her."

I looked past him to where Melody was standing. Obi had finished healing, so she was no longer supporting his weight. That didn't keep her from staying right by his side, her arm around his waist.

"*If this is what the Lord wants for him, you cannot deny it,* " Josette said. "*I believe this is as it is supposed to be.* "

I took a deep breath. There wasn't time to argue. "Fine," I said. "If this is what you want?"

He smiled. "It is."

"You know you won't be able to fly anymore."

His shirt moved as he flexed his wings beneath it. "I've never really gotten used to these anyway," he said.

"Kneel down."

Thomas got on his knees, and I put my hand on his forehead. I'd never tried this on an angel before. Actually, I had only done this

once before, to Obi. I let my power flow through my hand and into Thomas, focusing on infusing him with energy. Unlike with Obi, I could feel the power already in him. I concentrated on wrapping my own around it, trying to keep as much of it from leeching away as possible. His wings were folded tight on his back, but I could see the shirt loosening on him as they shrunk away to nothing. A moment later he began to moan, and I knew I had done enough.

I took my hand away, and Thomas opened his eyes. He looked thoughtful, and then got to his feet. “I think it’s better this way,” he said, stretching his arms and back. “Although I will miss Heaven.”

“You feel okay?” I asked.

“Yes. No regrets,” he said.

“You are quite skilled at bringing people to your cause,” Dante said from over the back of my shoulder, surprising me. I hated when he did that.

“Dante,” I said. “Meet Thomas.”

Thomas held out his hand. Dante took it and shook vigorously. “It is my pleasure, signore. Now, I will take you…” He stopped speaking, and his eyes jumped. I was spinning around enough to get dizzy, and now I saw that Charis was headed towards us.

“Ms. Stone,” Dante said, circling around us to greet her. “It has been a long time.”

“Dante,” she said, her voice as hard as her name. “Not long enough. All this time, you knew about the Beast, and you said nothing. Do you know what I went through, that you might have been able to prevent?”

I stepped between them. “Charis, I know how you’re feeling, but we need to do this later, okay? Please.”

Her eyes spat venom, but she nodded. “You’re right. He’s not worth it anyway.”

Dante’s face was pale, and he looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but standing there with us. “Are we going then?” he asked, his voice weak.

“Obi,” I called. “Come on.”

He came over with Melody and Izak. Dante bowed slightly when the demon reached us.

“It has been a while, has it not?” he said. Izak nodded. “It is good to see you are free from that one.” Izak nodded again, and smiled. It left me wondering what their history was, that they were so cordial with one another.

“This is Melody,” Thomas said, motioning to the angel. “Melody, this is Dante.”

“I know who Dante is,” she said, her voice cool.

“Ah, still rooting for Heaven?” he asked. She turned red. “No matter. I cannot take you with us, unless you’d like to follow in your mentor’s footsteps.”

Melody shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Of course,” Dante said.

“Melody,” Thomas said. “Please promise me you won’t tell the others about this. Remember what I told you, we don’t know who we can trust.”

“I know,” she replied. “I promise on His name that I will not reveal anything to them about the Beast, until you tell me I can.”

Thomas walked over to her, gave her a hug, and kissed her on the forehead. “Thank you,” he said.

“Izak,” I said, facing the demon. “Thank you for everything. Especially for saving my ass, and Obi’s ass. We’ll meet again, and when we do, I’ll have Sarah with me.”

He didn’t look too sure of that, but he nodded again.

“*Tell him I love him, and that he is a true spirit of goodness in my eyes,* ” Josette said. I relayed the message, and a tear rolled down the fiend’s cheek. He grabbed my arm, and looked deeply into my soul. I could feel his power reverberate through me as he expressed himself to her without a word.

“Let’s go,” Charis said.

“So, do we have to hold hands and sing cumbaya or something?” Obi asked. “I’ll see you around Melody.” He winked at her, and she blushed.

“We do have to be touching,” Dante said. I put my hand on one of his shoulders, Charis the other. We all joined from there. Dante closed his eyes and muttered something. I felt a cool breeze, and when I opened my eyes we were standing on the steps of the Library of Congress. That was such an awesome trick.

“Tax laws, right?” I asked Dante. I felt him wavering under my shoulder, so I shifted my grip to hold him up. His eyes looked a little glassy, and his skin was nearly translucent. “Are you okay?”

He put his bony hand on mine and patted it. “I’ll be fine, signore,” he said. “I’ve never done so many at such a distance before. Follow me.”

I had never been to the Library of Congress before. I had seen

some pictures of the inside - the huge round reading room with the desks arranged in concentric circles around the center, the grand exterior with the columns and steps. That wasn't where we were. This building was more flat, edged, and modern. It looked more like a military bunker than a library, at least to me.

"I thought you said Library of Congress?" I asked.

"This is the Law Library," Charis replied. "All of the law books are here."

"Over two million," Dante said. "Come."

Dante pulled us through the building at a furious pace, dashing through hallways and corridors too quickly for me to get my bearings. The next thing I knew, we were stopped in front of a huge shelf of books that all looked nearly identical, save for the volume numbers printed on the spine.

"See, signore. The Bible is still here," he said. "If Rebecca had found it, I doubt she would have left it for us." He reached in and pulled a book from the shelf. It was identical to those around it.

"Heh, I guess nobody ever actually bothers to read the tax laws," Obi said. "Best hiding place, ever."

"The Sleeping don't even see this book," Dante replied. He held it in his palm, cover up, and placed his other hand over it.

"I thought it was a scroll?" I said.

"This book was made by the first angel, Lucifer himself. It is not bound to any single form." He closed his eyes and whispered foreign words. The Bible caught fire in his hand, though the flames did him no harm. The original binding burned away, revealing a simple black lacquered wood cover beneath. It bore no writing, no markings or indication of what it was, but now that the glamour had been removed I could feel the energy leeching off of it.

Dante opened the book, and then set it in front of him, hanging stationary in the air before us. "Here it is," he said, pointing at the mark, set in gold on the page. "This is the Book of the Beast." He began thumbing through the pages. "It is a history of the war."

We all looked on in amazement. Despite all that I had seen and done as a Divine, the fact that we were looking at text penned by Lucifer himself, before he was cast down to Hell was mind blowing.

He came to the final page, and rested his finger next to the final passage. "Here is the final passage. The servants used these words to encrypt their code."

Thomas approached, getting close to it and looking down. "I

need a piece of paper, and a pen," he said. "I'll write a few of the strings, and hopefully you can help me decrypt them."

"I'll get it," Obi said, racing out of the room.

"What does the final paragraph say?" I asked.

Dante cleared his throat. "For in those final days it came to pass that the Beast was thus defied, the might of his essence imprisoned for all time by the will of God and the sanctity of His creation. We hail the honor and glory of our Lord, and we mark this day as a day of Blessing. Let all of Heaven remember. Let all of Heaven remain. Thanks be to God."

He glanced up, the power of the words etched across his face. My limbs tingled in response, and I could tell by Thomas' and Charis' expressions that they were sharing the experience.

Obi came back in with a sheet of copier paper and a pen. He handed it to Thomas. "Amen," he said. "Now let's find this thing so we can shut him up once and for all."

Thomas took the paper and pen, and wrote out three strings. One was in angelic scripture, two were demonic.

"How are we supposed to decrypt something that's written in different languages?" I asked.

Obi was staring at them intently, his eyes flicking from the Bible to the paper. "Shh," he said. "Thomas, write out a few more. Make sure you go in order."

The former angel complied, writing out a dozen more strings.

"They alternate," Obi said. "One demonic, one angelic. It's not much, but it's a start."

We scanned the strings, we looked at the passage, we scanned the strings again. Thirty minutes passed. An hour.

"This is going to take forever," I said. "I don't think the idea was to create a code that could be cracked in minutes, and every minute we spend could be the last minute we have without the Beast in this world."

"Obi," Thomas said. "Can you get me more paper? Grab as much as you can find."

"Sure, man," Obi replied, heading out again.

"Thomas, what is it?" I asked.

"A passing thought. There is a room in the Lord's palace in Heaven. It is a map of the universe, the breadth of His domain. It is a sight to behold, both in its size and scope."

"I have seen it," Dante said. He looked at the passages. "Could it

be?"

Thomas shrugged. "The map is not a series of dots for planets and stars and the like. With something so large, it would quickly become unreadable. The points would be so close together as to create nothing but a screen of white." Thomas turned the paper over and wrote the first letter from the Bible in the center. He then carefully etched the first and last word of the first two strings over it, being sure to connect the lines with great care. The result was just a small piece, but it did have a familiarity to it.

Obi came back in, dropping a ream of copier paper on the floor. "Is this enough?" he asked.

Thomas nodded. "I'm sorry to say, this will take some time. Dante, can you put the book on the floor. I'm not comfortable touching it."

"Of course, signore," Dante said. The Bible slowly lowered itself to the ground.

"Each letter in Lucifer's Bible is the center form of a larger shape," Thomas explained. "The larger shapes together will form an even bigger shape. My feeling is that what we will have is a map."

"With a big red 'X'?" Obi asked.

Thomas smiled. "Almost."

He set himself to the work, starting with the first letter and the first few passages. Obi leaned over his shoulder, observing. When he reached the tenth letter, Obi stopped him.

"That's not right, man," he said. "The shapes are too out of whack to fit together."

"Are you sure?" Thomas asked. He examined the papers, then pushed them aside. "I'll start again." And he did.

Another hour passed. Charis and I sat against the wall in silence, though at some point she had leaned in and put her head on my shoulder. Dante had hovered over Thomas for a while, but now he came over to us.

"My friends," he said. Charis lifted her head and gave him another icy welcome, which the poet ignored. "I'm afraid I must return to Purgatory now, or I will lose the way back. My thoughts and prayers go with you, as well as any offer of apology you may choose to accept. I know I have caused much harm with my decisions, and some have been made out of no more than anger, jealousy, and fear, and for that I am eternally sorry. Please, know that I am proud of you, and honored to have met both of you. I

believe we will meet again, and I will anxiously await that moment."

He held out his hand. I looked at Charis. Her expression had softened only slightly. Just because I knew her history, that didn't make it mine. I took Dante's offer of peace. "I'll see you soon," I said.

Charis got to her feet. She stared into Dante's eyes, her own flaring red and then fading to a warm brown. It was the first time I had seen their original color. How did she do that?

"I can spend eternity hating you for your mistakes, or I can praise you for your sacrifices. Today, I'll simply accept that you are as a flawed as the rest of us, and call it even."

She took his hand, and pulled him to her, wrapping her arms around him. Dante looked bewildered beneath the embrace. "I too will see you soon," she said.

Dante reached up and wiped away a tear as he smiled, looking every bit the part of a doting old grandfather. A moment later, he vanished.

"I think we've figured it out," Thomas shouted.

Charis and I went over and leaned in, looking at the scattered mess of shapes written across over a hundred pages.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"We just have to arrange them," Thomas said. He picked up the stack, and began laying them out on the floor. "I'll need one of you to hold some of these in place." He placed a sheet at hip level, where it would need to levitate to remain in position.

"I've got it," Charis said. Thomas let go, and the paper didn't move.

The former angel continued to move around the room, sometimes swapping sheets out, sometimes shifting their positions slightly. How he knew where to put them, I couldn't guess, but he worked with such purpose he had to be onto something.

"Wait," Charis said suddenly. The hanging pages shivered at her voice. "Landon, doesn't this look familiar to you at all?"

I looked around at the symbols. "No," I said. I examined them more closely, my mind picking me up where my eyes were failing. "Oh, crap."

Charis reached her hand out towards Thomas. "Give me the pages. I know where they go."

She took the remaining stack, and threw them up into the air.

They danced around one another, swirling in an invisible wind until they were floating around us.

"It isn't enough to just put them out," she said. "They need to be tighter. Obi, Thomas, wait over there."

The two of them backed up reluctantly, leaving her and I standing alone in the center of the papers. I could feel her power as she focused, and the ink lifted itself from the pulp, remaining neatly scrawled but floating in midair. She pulled them in, contracting them until they began to overlap. Moving them closer and closer to the two of us.

"Landon," she said. "I need your help. We have to move them faster."

"You know what this is going to do?" I said to her, tapping into my power and focusing on adding velocity to the whirlwind.

"Yes."

"You know I don't have a good feeling about this?"

"Yes."

I looked past the ink to where Obi and Thomas were standing. "I'm sorry guys," I said. "But it looks like this is a one-way ticket on a two-man train."

"You get to have all the fun," Obi said. "Be careful, man. You too sexy lady."

Thomas held up his hand. "Godspeed," he said.

Charis and I pulled the runes in tighter. I moved closer and put my arms around her, squeezing in so we could both make the journey. I had recognized some of the symbols from the Cave of Christ, and had discerned their purpose based on that.

The runes spun faster and faster, rocketing around us as we fed them more power. They started to glow in a soft blue, and then the ink began to melt. I looked out of the spaces between to where Obi and Thomas were standing together, until the spaces were filled in and vanished. Within moments we were surrounded by a solid light, and I could sense the universe around us moving and shifting. Charis looked up at me with tenderness and determination. I returned her gaze with admiration. We held onto one another while we traveled to the unknown.

The blue light was replaced with darkness. We had arrived.

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Wherever we were, it was nothing that any mortal eyes had ever come across before, and it was nothing that could be easily explained. A streamer of blue light gave some bit of luminance to the place, running along either side of a crystalline black wall in no specific pattern, branching and coalescing as though it were a river cutting its way through the geography. It snaked around as it traveled, following the sides of the containment downward beyond our feet.

We were on a platform, I could tell, made of the same black, opaque crystal substance and lifted some distance above the ground. The floor was covered in runes, Lucifer's runes, etched into the material and shimmering slightly against the blue light. Looking up, I got a feel for the immensity of the area. The ceiling was at least another four hundred feet away. Towards its center, there was a bright white light like a miniature star, pulsing in a gentle rhythm.

I could feel the power of this place as heat and energy that raised the hairs on my arms. I could probably charge a Tesla by

touch alone. It was nothing I had ever experienced before, but rather than foreboding, the sensation was intoxicating.

I focused, attempting to use my Sight to find Sarah or Rebecca, but as soon as I tried a searing heat and constricting tightness held me in agony until I was able to let go. I looked over at Charis, and knew by her face she had experienced the same.

"This can't be good," I whispered to her.

"Let's hope that we aren't the only ones being cut off," she replied.

I wasn't sure if we would even regenerate here. I stepped over to the edge of the platform with extreme caution, getting on my knees and peering down over the edge. The bottom of the room was far enough below as to be invisible, but there was a set of steps off the north edge. What freaked me out was that the steps weren't attached to anything, each one stuck in the air, spaced evenly apart. What really freaked me out is that the platform wasn't attached to anything either.

"Lucifer always was a show-off, wasn't he?" I asked Charis, sliding away from the edge and getting to my feet.

"What do you mean?"

"Everything is just floating in the air, like its suspended in ice. The steps are that way."

"Interesting." She followed my finger, looking down when she got to the edge. "If we don't stop them, we're dead anyway, so there's no point in being afraid of heights."

She bounced off the platform, and her head quickly disappeared. I could hear her feet tapping on the steps, descending in a hurry. She was right about the heights. I took a deep breath, and started down behind her.

The steps spun in an odd spiral, sometimes closer together, sometimes further apart. The distance between them altered variably as well, and there were a few places where it took a true leap of faith to make it from one to the next. When we got down far enough to finally see the ground below us, we came to a total pause.

The blue light was originating there, all of the tributaries feeding into the center of the floor, where a fountain rose from the ground. It looked as though a huge chunk of the black material had been pulled up from the surface in a single block to be carved out. It was seamless and massive, rising up a dozen feet or so. Chiseled

into it was what I took to be the scene of the Beast's defeat. Two angels, wings spread, dressed in rune covered breastplates, swords held high over a massive, hunched form. I recognized the face of Malize in an instant. The other had to be Lucifer, but the profile looked as though it had never been completed, with only the hint of a contour of eyes and nose and mouth. As for the Beast, it was a true mastery of stonework, for it held nearly no shape, yet elicited so much definition and emotion. To look on the carving was to fear.

The blue light spat up from the top of the fountain, spreading off into myriad lines of energy that cascaded over, illuminating it in a rich, heavenly glow before tumbling back down and running out again. It was a sight to behold, and I couldn't help but stand there and marvel at it.

"*The essence of the Lord is held within this place* ," Josette said, her voice reverent.

"More than that," I whispered in reply. I could feel the energy. It was like oil and water, yet somehow it was entwined. "The Beast's essence is trapped here. I can feel it."

"As can I," Charis said. "The question is, where are Rebecca and Sarah?"

I looked around. There was enough light running along the floor that I could see the walls, two hundred feet or so in the distance on all sides. There were no doors, no entries that I could define.

"Maybe they haven't arrived yet," I said.

"Or maybe this is a trick," Charis suggested. "Look around. There are no doors. We're trapped in here too."

The thought hadn't occurred to me. I fought back against sudden panic. Did we just doom ourselves to spending eternity trapped here? I tried to focus again, but was once more greeted with the intense pain.

"Now what?" I asked. I started walking around the room, looking for a seam in the wall. There had to be an entrance somewhere. How else would Rebecca and Sarah get in?

"I don't know," Charis replied. "Maybe we wait?"

"For how long?" I asked.

"Not long," the voice responded. It came from everywhere. It echoed throughout the room. It was deep, and smooth. Like jazz.

I spun on my heels, but I didn't see anything, or anyone. "Who are you?" I asked, edging back towards the fountain, to where Charis was standing.

“I’m the past,” the voice said. “I’m the future.”

The words ricocheted around the room, overloading my hearing.

“I’m nothing, and I’m everything.”

It was closer now. It seemed like it was sinking towards us.

“I’m the beginning, and I’m the end.”

Whoever was speaking, they should have been right on top of us. Charis and I both threw our heads around the room, seeking the source.

It was a whisper, softly into my ear.

“I’m a prisoner, but you’re going to help set me free.”

My eyes closed, not because I wanted them to, but because they had to. I felt a rush of heat and my limbs locked up tight. What had we just wandered into?

“Open your eyes, kid,” he said. I knew that voice, so much clearer now that it was centered in a single spot. My eyes opened on their own, but I already knew who I was going to see. That didn’t stop the revelation from taking my frozen head and slamming it hard into frozen air.

It was Mr. Ross.

He was still dressed in his pinstripe suit, sunglasses over his eyes, big grin on his face. Flanking him on either side like a pair of backup singers were Rebecca and Sarah. They were both wearing too-revealing, short, thin dresses; Rebecca’s in red, Sarah’s in white. Sarah held the Grail in her hands, her face a wall of stone.

“Ta-da!” he said with a laugh. “I bet you didn’t see this one coming.” He punched me in the gut, and allowed me to double over coughing. “A cheap shot, I know, but come on - you deserved it.”

“Go to hell,” I croaked.

“Believe me,” he said. “I’ve been there. And I have every intention of returning, once I’m done with this realm. Payback is a bitch, and I owe Lucifer big-time.”

Mr. Ross was the Beast. I tried to wrap my head around it, to get it processed in my mind. Mr. Ross, who had shown up on the shores of Purgatory out of nowhere. Mr. Ross, who had the amazing ability to travel to every realm, to get information from anyone, anywhere. Mr. Ross, who had taken me from Purgatory and left me on the torch of the Statue of Liberty, where I had run into Rebecca. Where I had run into Rebecca…The truth was a ton of bricks, an anvil, and a sandbag. He had been playing me from the first note.

“Aren’t you supposed to be trapped?” I asked, trying to keep my

emotions centered while I regained my breath and straightened up.

"Funny story," he said. "Lucifer and Malize, they were smart. They used the essence of your so-called God to trap me here. They were so careful to not leave any seams in the stone, which is infused with energy from Heaven itself. They were so clever to create the perfect patterns in the flow - the mathematics are so exceptional, I still don't know how they figured it out.

"Your so-called God on the other hand, He wasn't so smart. Or maybe, He was just a tad bit ignorant. The angel's trap, it was perfect. I was stuck like a pig on a spit. My physical incarnation melted to nothing right where that cute little statue is, and all my power and consciousness was left floating in the blue ether, too dispersed to form any kind of coherent thought, every moment an exceptional, intimate agony."

His lip curled, almost into a snarl, before he brought himself back and began smiling again. "Time passed. Then one day, God and his bff Lucifer got into a little spat, and He realized how royally He had screwed up. He covered his ass by creating Hell, which almost got things back in balance. Do you know what happened next?"

"Purgatory," I said. Dante had told me this story.

He clapped his hands. "Purgatory. I love Purgatory," he shouted. "So close to this realm, sitting right below the proverbial surface. Too close. The perfect prison sprung a leak."

I remembered what Rachel had said. She'd tried to warn me, but I hadn't understood. If I had caught on sooner, maybe I could have confronted Ross on a better playing field, where I would at least have power of my own.

"Drip, drip, drip," Ross said. "I began leeching out into Purgatory, too slowly for anyone to notice. It took thousands of your years for me to take a new form. Do you like it? After that, it was so easy to get things moving in the right direction again. I even found out I already had a fan club! Once I convinced Dante to trust me, everything just came together so nicely."

I looked over to Rebecca, and then Sarah. They were calm and patient while Ross delivered his monologue. I tried to get Sarah to make eye contact with me, but she almost seemed to be in a trance of her own.

"God wasn't stupid," Charis said. "He knew. He knew that against all odds you would find a way to escape, that someone

would try to set you free. It was balance, as you say."

Ross looked thoughtful. "You may have a point," he said. "It doesn't matter, because in the end it's come down to this moment, this time, and there's nothing you can do to stop it."

"Sarah?" She wouldn't look at me. "He's going to sacrifice you. He's going to kill you."

Her eyes found me then, so sweet and innocent, so mortal. "I know," she said. "My soul will go to to Heaven, or more likely Hell, and he will find me there and free me."

Ross laughed. "Was that your great hope, Landon? That you could talk her out of helping me? I'm sorry to disappoint you. Take them."

Rebecca and Sarah stepped forward. Sarah took Charis by the arm, tugging her towards the center of the room until she was standing under the light cascade of the fountain. Rebecca reached for me, but put her hand to my face before guiding me into position.

"I'm sorry it came to this," she said.

"Not sorry enough," I replied, turning my head away. After everything, she looked hurt.

She shoved me forward, moving me until I was standing below the fountain with Charis on my right. We were angled towards one another, and below us was a small pool in the center of a triangle. Sarah took the spot at the third point, and held the Grail out over it. When she let go, it hung in place.

"What are you doing?" I asked Ross. "Why not just kill us?"

"Kill you?" he asked. "Kid, it's taken quite a bit of luck just to keep you alive. Some of my servants have been, shall we say, a little over-enthusiastic. No, no, no, I never wanted to kill you, at least not yet. Did you think it was a stroke of good fortune, or the Hand of God that made us wait for you to arrive? Do you think an angel needed steps to get down from that platform?" He waved his hand up at the place where we had arrived. "It's taken quite a bit of work to get you here, especially with how stubborn you've been about the whole thing. It would have been so much simpler if you had just gone in the goddamn Box."

So, we were part of this somehow. "Why? Why do you need us? You have Sarah, she can set you free. Why go through so much to bring us here?"

He walked over, standing just outside the falling light, pacing

back and forth as he spoke.

"Balance," he said. "You see, it has taken thousands of years for my power to leak into Purgatory. Thousands of years for me to gather enough to create this form and begin to manipulate the world. Even after I break free of God's stranglehold it will take time before I can fully realize my goals. By making sure neither army was too powerful, I've given myself the time I need."

I felt my heart racing. My body refused to follow my commands without Ross' consent. Was that why trying to focus here caused so much pain? It was too many revelations, too soon.

"Our power," I said. "It didn't come from Purgatory. It came from you."

He clapped his hands again. "Yes! I convinced Dante we needed soldiers of our own, to maintain the balance and keep humankind from becoming manburger helper. The best part about that one is that it's not even a lie; the future of your species in this realm does depend on keeping Heaven and Hell on equal footing. I never cared about that. What I did care about is that they wound up too equal and confused to stop me. Dante agreed to my advice, and I started trying to imbue my power into the freshly dead, into the ones I thought would be the most agreeable slaves." He laughed and shook his head.

"It didn't work," he said. "My power would go in, they would scream, and they would vanish. Poof! Like they never existed at all." He shrugged. "The trick was that you had to be a diuscrucis to be able to absorb it, and you had to be in perfect balance to be able to use it. Trial and error, you know. Anyway, what I gave up was only ever meant to be a loan." His face turned dark, and his eyes flashed with a coldness I never wanted to experience ever again. "I want my power back."

He grinned from ear to ear, reached out and took Rebecca's hand, pulling her away from the three of us. "You're a good kid," he said. "Too good, actually. If you would have just gone with your honey in the first place, I would have let her keep you. I'm sure you would have enjoyed it." He gave me a suggestive wink and slid over to Charis. "As for you, I knew you'd find me sooner or later, even if it were just to tag along after that one over there. You're more of a goody-goody than he is, even if you like to think you aren't. Working for a God you don't believe in? If that isn't ironic, I don't know what is." He put his hand to her face, lifting it up so he could

look her in the eyes. “I’ll tell you what, sweetheart. I’ll give you one chance to join the winning team.”

I could see the fear in her eyes. I could almost see her shaking. Ross stood over her, waiting, but she didn’t respond.

“No?” he asked. He let go of her face and backed away. “Don’t say I didn’t offer. You can’t fight a god, Landon. Be honored that for a time you held even a drip of the power of one. Sarah, it’s showtime.”

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She looked over at him and smiled. “Don’t keep me waiting too long,” she said.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” he replied.

She reached out and took hold of Malize’s sword, pulling it from the scabbard on Charis’ back and looking it over. “I was going to use a regular knife, but this will add to the irony,” she said. The blade lit up in the white heavenly light.

“Sarah,” I said. “Sarah, please. Don’t do this.”

She looked at me. “Do not be afraid, brother. This is my destiny, my fate, my purpose. I was born to free the Beast. After all, it was the Beast who convinced Gervais to rape his own sister. Why do think he did it?”

“*Sarah, no* ,” Josette’s voice fell into my mind, frantic.

“You aren’t some puppet on a string,” I said. “It doesn’t matter what anybody says you were born to do. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“But I do want to,” she replied. “Everything I’ve felt for so long, everything that’s happened to me. It has all led me here, to this

moment. I'm so sad, and so tired, and so angry. I've seen it all happen, I know how it ends."

"Those are possible futures," I said. "None of them have to be."

"I'm sorry brother," she replied. "I have seen no other path. No other way to find relief." She took the blade, and stabbed Charis in a flare of white light. She gasped in shock and pain, looking down to watch the blood spill from her. The Grail floated over, placed under the wound where it collected her blood. The scene was too familiar. After Sarah had enough, she removed the sword. The wound closed over, but Charis looked pale and sick. Her eyes closed, and she passed out.

"*Landon, you have to do something, please,* " Josette cried, desperate.

"I can't move," I said.

"No, you can't," Sarah replied. She turned towards me and readied her thrust, the blood on the sword burned off by the light.

"*Landon* ," Josette shouted in my mind. "*Don't let her do this.* "

I tried to focus again, but the pain was unbearable. The more I pushed, the worse it got. "There's nothing I can do," I said in a whisper, choking on blood as the blade pierced my flesh. It was hot and cold at the same time, and I felt the blood passing out of me, watched it pour into the cup. Again.

She pulled the blade out. "There's nothing you can do," she agreed.

"Sarah, please," I said, my body weak, my eyes fighting to stay open. "What about your mother? She would never have wanted you to do this."

"My mother? My mother is dead because of you, her soul trapped with yours. Better for her to be one with the universe, than to be enslaved."

She took the sword and turned over her wrist. It was awkward with such a long blade, but she managed to make the vertical cut that would bleed her out. The blood poured from the wound, down into the Grail.

"*No* ," Josette said, her frantic panic turning to resolute strength. I felt her power overwhelm me, her energy taking hold of my body. She couldn't be controlled by the Beast. Her power came from somewhere else.

She pushed me forward, reaching out and grabbing the sword, pulling it from Sarah's hands and throwing it away. She tackled the

girl, throwing us both out of the fountain and onto the floor, moving my hand so that it locked around the wound, putting pressure on it and stemming the flow of blood. The geometry broken, the Grail fell to the ground with a soft clang, and the collected blood began to spill out into the pool.

"No!" I heard Ross cry. "It has to be all of it."

I heard the boots on the floor, Rebecca coming for us. Sarah wriggled beneath me, trying to get free.

"Sarah, listen to me," Josette said. Her voice was coming out of my mouth. I don't know how she was doing it, but she couldn't have picked a better time. "Listen to me."

I was laying on top of her. Tears were streaming from her face, and I could feel the warmth of her blood below my hand. She stopped struggling.

"Landon didn't kill me," Josette said. "I gave myself to him. I saved his life, so that he could protect you. I sacrificed myself so that you would be able to live a normal life, a mortal life. It doesn't matter why your father did what he did. To me you were a gift. You have always been my gift."

Rebecca was nearly on top of us. My body moved like lightning as Josette grabbed the dagger at my side and flung it into the demon. It planted itself right between her eyes, and she fell backward. It wouldn't keep her down, but it bought us more time.

"Sarah, I love you," Josette said. My own face was getting wet, my body responding to her emotions. "I've always loved you. I've tried so hard to protect you. I know it hasn't been easy for you. I know you've suffered, and I'm sorry. I've given all that I could. I've done all that I could. Please, it isn't too late."

The tears continued to fall, and she began to whimper. "Mother," she cried. "Mother, I'm scared. It hurts so much. It all hurts so much."

"Help us," Josette said. "Help Landon. Stop the Beast, or your hurt will never end. He knows nothing of love, or sacrifice. He knows only destruction. Please."

She flailed beneath us, her body writhing in an invisible agony. A piercing scream escaped from her then, a sound that reverberated from the walls and rocked the entire enclosure. Even Ross trembled at the noise. Then she stopped struggling, and I could feel the change.

"Landon," she said. "Help me."

I still couldn't move, the Beast wouldn't allow it. Josette could. She tore my shirt and quickly wrapped it tight around Sarah's wrist, staunching the flow of blood. We looked up. Ross had moved over to the fountain. He grabbed Charis' unconscious form and flung her like a sack of potatoes. She landed motionless on the floor.

"He's regaining his power," Sarah said. "I'm sorry. It was enough to set him free. It is too late."

"No, it is not too late," the newcomer said, appearing right in front of us. It was Dante. "You have freed some of his power, but it is not complete. Not while you live," he said to Sarah. He looked at me. "I am sorry, signore. I should have seen this sooner, but the leak was so small. I only found it because his power is being pulled through so strongly. He fooled me."

"He fooled all of us," Josette said for me.

Ross leaned down and dipped his hand in the pool of light. An inky blackness washed off and began spreading through it. At the same time, I could feel his energy growing. He looked up at us, his face menacing, his eyes crackling with dark power.

"Dante," he said. "My friend. Stay a while." He reached out, and Dante's body contorted into a sitting position. "We have a lot to talk about. A lot to plan. You can definitely be useful. In fact, I could never have gotten this far without you."

The poet groaned in pain, the stress evident on his face. He settled back and relaxed, easing himself straight, overcoming whatever Ross was doing to him. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline, signore," he said.

Josette got me up and reached out, pulling Sarah to her feet. The motion drew Ross' attention.

"You! I trusted you!" he shouted. "How could you?" His voice boomed throughout the entire structure, shaking the walls. The blackness was still spreading slowly through the rivers of light. He held out his hand and creased his brow in concentration, but nothing happened.

"He can't affect you," Dante said to Sarah. "Not without his full power. We need to get out of here, now. Landon, get closer to Charis and I will try without touching." He didn't sound too confident, but he did sound determined.

"*Josette, we have to get Charis* ," I said.

She launched us forward towards her. Her eyes had opened, and they burned with a fierce red intensity. As we approached, she held

up her hand.

"I am in control," Vilya said. "Do not touch me."

"Dante," I cried,"We're ready."

He nodded and took Sarah's hand. He had just closed his eyes when the sword point blossomed through his stomach.

"You aren't going anywhere," Rebecca said, pulling the blade out and shoving him to the side with her foot. "Not until the Beast is free."

I glanced back to Ross. He removed his hand from the pool and started walking towards us. "Thank you, my pet," he said. "Now, we have some uninvited guests who are gumming up the works. I think it's time to remove them."

He held up his hand, and I felt Josette twist inside of me, her cry of pain exploding in my soul. My body was instantly frozen again, and I could feel her being ripped away. I focused, desperate to hold onto her, doing my best to ignore the searing agony.

Rebecca held the sword point up to Sarah. "If you won't kill yourself, I'll do it," she said, reaching out and taking her by the hair. She pulled her towards Ross, ignoring her screams and struggles.

My eyes were the only thing I could move. I swung them desperately from left to right, in search of anything that I could use, doing my best to stay conscious over the double whammy of Josette's extraction and my efforts to use the Beast's power. Was he feeling the same pain? My eyes finally found it, Malize's sword, resting on the ground only a few feet from Sarah.

"Sarah," I cried, forcing my lips to move, forcing air through my lungs. I could only pray that she would know what to do.

The sword teetered, then launched from the ground towards her. She stopped her struggling, reaching out and catching the hilt, swinging it wildly over her head at Rebecca. The demon let go of her and ducked away, coming to her feet and deflecting the first of Sarah's strikes.

I had taught her what I could of her mother's skill with a blade. She had been a fast learner, but her lessons were nowhere near complete. She put up a good fight, the sword a strong extension of her arm, moving and flowing along with her as she put all of that practice to the test. Rebecca had a lot more experience, and it showed. She easily outmaneuvered Sarah, twisting and bringing her blade up and across, using it to rip the sword from Sarah's hands

and send it tumbling away.

"Enough," she said, hissing in frustration. She reached out to grab Sarah again. "Let's get this done with."

"No," Sarah said. Her voice was calm and composed; the scared young girl replaced by someone strong and confident. Rebecca froze, as though she had been turned to stone. "You will not harm me," Sarah said. Rebecca lowered her sword.

"What are you doing?" Ross asked. "Bring her here."

Rebecca's arm started to rise again.

"No," Sarah repeated.

"Rebecca, do it!" Ross cried.

"No," Sarah said a third time. Rebecca's hands dropped as she heeded the Command. "Kill the Beast."

Her eyes widened, but she was powerless to resist. She turned on Ross, raising her sword and charging. Ross barely had a moment to react before the vampire was on him. The distraction set me free, and I pulled back on Josette and started running towards Dante at the same time. Charis followed my lead, and we all reached the stricken poet together.

I leaned down over him. "Dante," I said. His eyes fluttered and opened. "You've got to get us out of here."

I looked back at Ross and Rebecca. The Beast had flipped her over and pinned her to the ground. One hand was tight against her neck, the other was holding Malize's blade. Her head flopped over, and I saw the pain and fear and sadness in her eyes.

"Landon, help me," she croaked, her voice half curse, half sob. "Help me, please. I love you."

Again, she wasn't lying. My heart pounded as my pulse quickened even more. Dante had closed his eyes, and was murmuring and tracing runes in the air. One effort, one strong pull, and I could bring her to us. Except… she couldn't make the trip. I winced when Ross brought the sword down into her heart, causing her body to arch up and a horrible moan to escape from her lips. As she took her last breath, he looked at me, and smiled - a smile I'd never forget.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, hoping beyond hope that she could hear me. For the second time, I felt my heart shatter.

"See you around, kid," Ross said. The air shimmered around us, and everything went black.

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The world faded back into view. We were grouped together in a field, surrounded by stalks of wheat. It was nighttime, and I could hear a cacophony of crickets calling out in the darkness. Dante lay on the ground below me, coughing up blood and breathing erratically. His shirt was a sopping wet mess. Sarah and Charis kneeled on either side, their hands still on his shoulders.

"Dante?"

He opened his eyes. "Did we make it, signore?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yes, thanks to you."

He tried to take a deep breath, and wound up coughing again. I leaned in and put my arm behind him, helping him to sit up.

"I think you won't be thanking me soon," he said between coughs. "The Beast may not have his full power, but he has enough to start wreaking havoc on this world. He will not rest until he has finished what has been started."

I figured as much. "How long do we have?"

"It will take him some time to collect the energy that has been released, and I have cut him off from Purgatory. A few weeks? A

few years? Who can say? He cannot launch an assault on the other realms without his full strength. He cannot get his full strength while any of you live."

"So, we have some time to figure out how to destroy him?"

Dante tried to laugh. It was a miserable failure. "You can't destroy him, signore. He *is* destruction. No, we must find a way to entrap him once more. There is no other choice."

I wasn't relishing the thought. "What are the odds that we survive this?" I asked.

He shook his head. "What are the odds that you will want to?" he replied.

The question gave me chills. I tried to shake it off. "Will you be okay?"

"I will be fine. The wound will heal as soon as I return home. It takes more than a demonic edge to put down Dante Alighieri."

"Then you should head back," I said. "I'll be in touch soon."

"Yes. I will rest, but only just long enough. Time is not on our side, signore."

"Dante," Charis said sharply, before the poet could disappear.

"Yes, my dear," he replied.

A tear dropped from her eye, onto the old man's shirt. "Thank you."

"For you, anything," he said, and then he was gone.

I got to my feet, rising up above the wheat, and looked around. We were in a huge, open expanse, but there was an old stone farmhouse about half of a mile away. I recognized the place. It wasn't an exact match, but it was close enough. Dante had delivered us to Tuscany.

"I guess he's still afraid to go back to Florence," Charis said, putting her hand on my shoulder.

"It seems that way," I agreed.

"I'm going to go check out the farmhouse," she added. "I don't know about you, but my head is killing me."

She wasn't alone. Ross' efforts to extract Josette had taken its toll. I focused, finding the threads of our souls. Right now, they were in tatters. "We'll be along soon," I said, taking her into a strong embrace. "Thank you, for everything you did."

I didn't hold her long, but when I let her go she was crying. "Thank you, Landon. You saved our lives."

I shook my head. "We all did our part, together. Besides, the

Beast is yet to come." I gave her a stupid smile, trying to ease the moment. She couldn't hold back her laugh.

"That was really bad," she said.

"So bad it was good," I replied.

She didn't say anything else. She just started walking towards the farmhouse.

Sarah's empty eyes were already soaked before I lifted her up in the biggest hug I had ever given anyone.

"Landon, I'm so sorry," she cried. "I'm so sorry."

"Shhh," I said. "It's okay. It'll be okay."

"I ruined everything. I killed so many people. I was so angry. I just wanted the pain to stop. I just wanted the world to stop. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She clung to me tightly, burying her face in my neck. I held her close and stroked her hair.

"It's okay," I repeated. "We'll make it right. Don't worry."

"I'm evil. I'm so evil. I don't deserve to be alive. I don't deserve to have a brother like you, or a mother like mine."

Her words twisted the knife that was already planted in my heart. I picked her up and kept her close, carrying her all the way back to the farmhouse. In that moment, she was ten years old again, and all she needed was someone to protect her, to look out for her, and to care.

I used my foot to push open the door to the house. It was old, and not in great shape, but it was more than good enough. Charis was sitting in a dilapidated wooden rocking chair in front of an empty fireplace. It was clear to me she was mourning the loss of Ezekiel, but she still glanced over at us for just an instant, and I could feel the warmth of the caress.

I carried Sarah up the stairs in search of a bed. She had stopped apologizing, and was sobbing quietly into my shoulder.

The master bedroom had an old four-posted queen in it. The mattress was barren, and looked worn well past its time, but I'd never been so grateful to have it. I put Sarah down as gently as I could, and slid onto the bed beside her. As soon as I leaned back, she scooted over to me, putting her head on my chest. I rubbed her back, feeling her breathing even out. A few minutes later, she was asleep.

"Sweet dreams," I whispered to her, hopeful that she could escape the nightmare for a little while at least.

Left alone in the dark, my mind flashed back to Rebecca. She

was crying out for me to save her, Malize's sword stuck in her heart, burning her in its heavenly light. My own tears ran freely while I remembered her, and all that we had gone through together. Did it matter that she had betrayed me? We had all made mistakes. Hadn't we only done what we believed was right?

I saw Ross' face then; the sick, wicked smile he had given me as he cut her down. He was the Beast. He was destruction. He was the universe's answer to God in a game that would never end. "They can't win, if you don't play," Sarah had once said to me. The trouble was, neither could you.

Game on.

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Book Three: Broken

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“*Landon.* ”

The voice was a whisper, an ethereal suggestion that registered somewhere in the depths of my soul, a vaguely understood siren’s call.

“*Landon.* ”

A little stronger this time, almost loud enough for me to recognize the source. Almost loud enough for me to follow.

“*Landon.* ”

I heard it. I knew it. Sarah. She was calling me. I tried to open my eyes, but they didn’t respond. They refused my command. Was I being Commanded? No. She was calling me, asking for me, but not demanding.

“Sarah? ” I responded finally.

“*Help me* ,” came the reply.

Help her? I already had. As far as I knew, we were still laying on the old bed in the abandoned farmhouse where Dante had left us, not long before.

“*Josette?* ” I called out for my angel, tried to focus and find her. I

could feel my power, see the threads. They were still frayed from the damage the Beast had done, and I wasn't sure they would ever repair. It was such a tangled mess, I couldn't feel Josette anywhere. I could see her there, but it was as though she had been torn apart. Time was the only thing that would put us back together. Time we didn't have.

"*Where are you?* " I shouted out, searching for her. Her presence was a nudge, a tap, a sleight of hand.

I saw a point of light, and it began to spread, expanding outward until it appeared to me as a doorway. The door was fresh, new oak, but its surface held deep claw marks. I had never seen this kind of doorway before, but I knew what it was. Josette had said that was how she had found me, when the demon Reyzl was about to end my life. She had come through it, and she had saved me. Now I would save her daughter, again.

"I'm coming," I said, feeling myself floating towards the doorway. There was nothing else in my vision, just an infinite blackness, and the oak doorway floating in the ether. As I approached, I could hear the sobbing behind it. I put my hand up to it, ran my fingers across the deep grooves the claw marks had created. A sharp pain, and I drew my hand back, blood running from a sharp splinter. I focused, and it vanished. The wound vanished. The door opened.

There was nothing beyond it. A white, impenetrable light. I knew it for what it was; a transport from my soul to Sarah's.

I didn't hesitate to step through. I was blinded for a moment by the light, and then I was there, and she was there. We were in her Source, the place where her demonic heritage and her angelic heritage combined and her power pooled. I expected it to be a calm place, a peaceful place, a place of meaning to her. Josette's was the room she had lived in as a child. Mine was all of Purgatory; something I hadn't understood before, but I now knew was the result of tapping into the Beast's power. Power that had been leaking out into the realm for thousands of years.

Instead, it was a place of contrasts and chaos.

It was large, larger than I could have expected from anyone who was still technically mortal. A forest that stretched out around me, a mixture of dense, green vegetation and the grayness of death and decay. Green vines snaked around rotted tree trunks, while dry, brittle branches threatened to snap and drop from otherwise

healthy growth. The sky was both heavy and blue, with thick clouds racing unnaturally across a bright morning sky. In the distance, I could hear birds calling. In the distance, I could hear animals screaming.

I could also hear the sobbing, and I followed it into the foliage, stepping carefully past the corpses of squirrels and rabbits, and sending their living counterparts scurrying away. A blast of thunder shook the earth below me, and I heard a snarl from the trees to my left.

"*Landon* ," came the cry, from up ahead. It was sharper now, more desperate. I scanned the trees for the source of the snarl, but couldn't see anything. I started running, not even noticing the thick mist that had begun to fill in around me.

My feet pounded the dirt even as the rain began to fall, and in moments the dry turf was a muddy mess. I had to strain to pull myself forward, to get my feet out of the muck and keep moving. Another snarl, this time on my right. She was calling to me for help, but there was something here. Something that wanted to stop me.

I saw a clearing through a copse of bramble, with a small, open pagoda resting in the center. I could see her through the vines, kneeling there, her head in her hands. I didn't hesitate, didn't slow. My body crashed into the vines, into the thorns, and they ripped and tore into me, doing their best to impede my rescue. For a second, I thought I was hooked, as I pressed into the bramble and it pulled back against me, gripping me tightly in a thousand fingers of sharp pain. I focused, strengthening my will, grunted and shoved forward. I could feel the thorns release, and I stumbled out into the clearing, the blood running down into my eyes, down onto my hands, down to fall at my feet.

"Sarah," I said, approaching her, looking on her with bleary eyes. The rain soaked into me, mixing with the blood and diluting it, the effect causing my entire body to run red.

Her head lifted slowly. Here in her Source she had eyes, a striking red and gold that was muted in her pain. I could see them dilate when she began to focus on me. They were swollen from her sobs.

"Landon," she replied, her voice little more than a whisper. "You came for me."

I reached the edge of the pagoda, nearly under its stacked roof and out of the rain. The mist was flowing around my feet and

rising, but the inside stayed dry and unaffected.

"I always will," I replied. I lifted my left foot, preparing it to take the final step onto the bamboo floor of the structure, to join Sarah in the comfort and safety of the structure.

Her eyes widened like a frightened doe, and I felt the presence beside me before I heard the snarl. Something slammed into my side, powerful and sharp. It dug into my flesh, deep into my lungs, before the force threw me away from Sarah.

I didn't cry out as I hit the wet, misty ground and slid through the mud, blood pouring from the wound. I succeeded in taking a haggard breath, but I could almost feel the air leaking out while my left lung deflated. I focused, willing myself to heal, reaching for a power I couldn't hold. This was Sarah's Source, not mine. I had no power here.

I heard it coming for me, splashing through the rain. I reached up and wiped my eyes, trying to get the water and blood out of them. I couldn't get a good look at my attacker through the distorted blur, but I could see they were right on top of me. Desperate, I reached out, finding a tree branch at the tips of my fingers. I gathered my strength and heaved myself towards it, moving just enough to wrap my hand around its bulk. My assailant was in the air, pouncing towards me. I gripped the branch and swung it upwards.

The branch connected, and then shattered, scattering in hundreds of rotted pieces. My enemy was unharmed, and they landed on me, crushing down on my ribs and cracking them below the pressure. Now I cried out in pain, searching inward, begging for Josette or even Ulnyx to somehow find a way to save me. My words fell empty. They weren't there.

I heard another snarl, and felt a claw rip into my face, slashing deep wounds across my cheek. Another cry, but I got my hand up in time to block the opposing blow. I blinked desperately, trying to improve my sight, trying to get a look at my attacker. The water cleared from my eyes, and it was nearly enough to stop my defense.

It was Sarah.

My mind reeled, trying to figure out how Sarah could be crying in the pagoda, and straddling my chest beating the crap out of me at the same time. Had she lured me here to attack me? Was this just another one of the Beast's tricks? The pain in my lungs, the pain in my ribs, the pain in my face made it hard to think.

“Sarah,” I squeaked, trying to get her attention, to reason with her. Her arm came down, and I blocked it. She used her other arm to bat mine away. Another blow, another gash in my face.

I blinked again, and I looked into her face. It was cold, so cold. An anger and fear so white hot that it had frozen. The rain dripped from her face, disguising her tears, but I could see them there on the edges of deep, dark, red-gold eyes. I started to raise my hands again to defend myself, but decided against it. I had no power here, no strength to defeat her. If she wanted to kill me, she could kill me. Fighting would only make it worse.

I took as deep of a breath as I could and let myself relax, feeling my body sink further into the muck. Sarah sat above me, her hate-filled eyes peering down. She snarled and wheezed, her breath coming out in chunks, her body convulsing from the effort.

“Get off of him,” came the shout from behind her. Sarah shifted on me, turning her body to look back. At Sarah. What the hell was going on?

Sarah sat on top of me, her legs pressed down on my broken ribs, her claws raised above my face. Sarah walked towards her, sunlight trailing behind, the mist dissipating where she stepped. Her brown ringlets bounced with each footfall, silhouetting and framing her face, enhancing her calm, gentle, beautiful presence.

“I said get off,” she repeated, her voice soft and forceful.

The other Sarah turned back and looked down at me again, her hate-filled eyes softening. Without a word, she slipped off of me and backed away, taking up position behind Sarah, who knelt down and put her hand against my forehead.

“I’m sorry, Landon,” she said. Her eyes were still puffy from crying. “Please, help me.”

There was a warmth from her hand on my head, and the pain vanished. The blood vanished. The rain and the mist and the thunder vanished. The hint of death and decay remained, but it had been subdued. Sarah had found the strength to resist.

“Help you?” I asked, shoving myself to my elbows, looking at the two Sarahs and trying to make sense of it. “You just helped me.”

There was only sadness in her eyes. “For now,” she replied. “I don’t know how long I can control it.”

“What is it?”

She looked back at the other Sarah, crouched behind her, claws planted in the dirt.

“She’s me. The other part of me. My secret shame. I am a true diuscrucis, brother. The blood of the angel, Josette and the demon, Gervais courses through my mortal veins. The war out there is reflected in my soul, a war within myself. A fight for control. She is always with me, and I am always with her.”

She reached back and put her hand on the other Sarah’s head, gently stroking her hair.

“You fight?” I asked.

“Yes. Whenever I am asleep, we fight. It’s not always physical. Sometimes, she haunts my dreams. Sometimes, I haunt hers. It is so hard to find peace, so hard to be normal. I’ve fought it for so long. My entire life I’ve fought it.”

We all had our good sides, and our bad sides. Whether we just woke up grumpy one morning, had a bad day, or maybe something good happened. It wasn’t so literal for most of us. Not that the two Sarahs were any more real - her soul was split, balanced as good and evil. As she had said, much like the outside world. All it would take is a push in one direction or another. Just one little shove.

“What can I do?” I asked.

I’d never imagined this was how she was living her life. She had never spoken to me of her inner turmoil, her struggle against her evil nature. Or was it a struggle against her good nature? One side of her was in control right now, but what about the scratches on the doorway to her Source?

She shook her head. “I can’t be trusted,” she said. “What happened with Rebecca, with the Beast. All of those people…” She took her hands away from the other Sarah, and used them to bury her face again, to let her soul cry out in pain for the lives she had taken.

I got to my feet and approached her, but she backed away.

“I don’t want your pity. Not here,” she said, taking a deep breath and catching herself. She looked up at me. “I want your help.”

“Help to do what?” I asked. “I don’t understand what you’re looking for?”

“Just listen to me, brother,” she said. “I was ready to kill myself for the Beast, to kill everyone for my release from this personal hell. He promised me when I died he could bring me back, the true, singular, balanced me. He promised that I would find peace, and that when he was done with this world he would leave me in charge, to do with it as I wished while he went to destroy

something else. He told me I could bring them back, bring you back, if that were what I desired. All I had to do was serve him, by killing you and Charis, and then killing myself."

"He was lying to you," I said.

She shook her head. "I would have known if he were lying. He was not."

"Then why help me? Why help us escape?"

"You are hearing, but you are not listening. Balance, brother. When Rebecca brought me to Gervais, I became angry, so very angry. Not only for what he did to me, but what he did to my people." She reached back and grabbed the other Sarah by the arm, pulling her roughly to her feet. "This one here took control. She held out my fingers, and they became claws. She used them to carve out his eyes."

The other Sarah smiled. "He deserved it," she said, speaking at last.

I remembered what I had felt when I saw the underground city in ruins, its inhabitants scattered in a gory mess. I remembered Gervais' cold confidence when I had confronted him, his needling words and twisted jokes. He did deserve it.

"I cannot say if he deserved it," Sarah said. "This part of me says that he didn't. That no thing deserves to suffer, no matter what they have done."

"You fought me," the other Sarah said, looking at Sarah. "All of the time I could feel you trying to get back, to take control."

"Yes. Until I saw mother," she agreed. She looked at me. "I thought you had killed her, and taken her. I lost the will to fight against it when that happened. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wanted to tell you, but I was trying to protect you. I thought the truth would hurt more."

"The truth never hurts more," they both said at once. I had learned the hard way.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"I know, brother," Sarah said. "That is why I called to you. That is why I need your help. She is able to kill, and have no remorse for doing so. She is able to be selfish, and have no regrets." Her eyes began to well with tears again. "I am not she, and I cannot bear the pair of the remorse, the agony of the regrets. I don't know how, and I fear in my weakness I will not be able to prevent her from taking over again. She would have just now, if you had not arrived when

you did."

It was a chilling thought. What would have happened if she had woken up while I was still asleep? If she had found me there, unprotected? If she had found Charis there? What would she have done, knowing the Beast wanted us all dead?

I reached out for her again, but again she backed away. "No, brother. Please. I am not worthy to be touched. I'm not worthy to be loved."

I felt my own tears threatening at the statement. I looked at them both. "You aren't evil, Sarah. The Beast used you. He knew what would happen. He knew you would lose control." The Beast's thirst for destruction wasn't limited to the physical.

Another step. She backed away from me again. "You know what I did. How can you love me?"

My mind flashed back to the sight of the bodies, spread out on the steps of St. Patrick's, dead at her Command. The thought made me angry, and beyond sad. I had promised her I would protect her. I had promised her mother I would protect her, and keep her safe from the evil we all knew she possessed, though I had never imagined it would take such a form. I wasn't angry at her. I was angry at myself. I had let her down. I had ignored the problem when it had first arisen, and she had paid the price.

"It wasn't your fault," I said. "It was mine. I wasn't there for you. I promised I would protect you, and I broke my promise."

She stared at me, her eyes flaring in red and gold. The other Sarah watched me as well, and then leaped towards me with a snarl.

I was ready for it. I caught her wrist in my hand, twisted and pulled her, circling around behind her. I held her arms crossed over her body, and brought her in close, holding her tightly.

"It isn't your fault either," I whispered into her ear. "You didn't ask to be here. Neither of you asked to be like this. It was the pain of what Gervais did to you that caused this. If the Beast told him to have you, he surely told him how to break you. You deserve to be whole."

I spun her around, keeping my grip on her, and pulling her into me. She struggled for a moment, and then relaxed into my shoulder. Sarah approached us cautiously, afraid to be close to her counterpart. When she was close enough, I reached out and pulled her in.

“I do trust you,” I said to them. “You aren’t what you were made to be. You are what you make yourself.” I kissed both of them on the top of their heads. “I’ll help you. I have an idea.”

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2

I woke up to the crowing of a rooster somewhere outside of the farmhouse. When I opened my eyes, I saw that Sarah had shifted in the night, flopping away from me onto her stomach, where she was fast asleep. Four-thirty, I knew. I had been out for nearly twelve hours. Twelve hours that the Beast had been able to use to gain his strength.

"*Josette.* " I closed my eyes and reached out for her. I felt rested, but there was something there, a sense of wrongness that I couldn't place. I found her, but we were both still ragged.

"*Ulnyx.* " I tried calling out to the Were, but I didn't expect him to respond. He had shrunk away from me as much as he could after Lylyx had died and Charis had stolen his revenge, and right now I was nowhere near strong enough to force him out of hiding. I felt only a small drop of sympathy for him, knowing how he had resisted returning control of my body to me when the fight was already lost. He would have killed us both in his rage.

I slipped off the mattress as quietly as I could, and made my way out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. There was a cracked

mirror hanging above a rusted out sink, which I used to confirm that I looked as horrible as I felt. I peered into the reflection, examining the remnants of the wound Sarah had made with Malize's sword. The heavenly light hadn't hurt the way the hellfire did, and it had healed pretty well externally, save for a smooth white line on my abdomen that I wasn't sure would ever fade. Instead, I felt the drain of it on the inside, as if it had burned away a part of me. The fact that I was healing so slowly, and still felt so tired only added to that belief. I evacuated the bathroom, creeping across the bedroom as quietly as I could, heading for the stairs.

Charis greeted me with a weary smile when I emerged into the small living room where I had left her. She was still sitting in the chair in front of the empty fireplace, her eyes bloodshot and puffy, her lips dry and cracked.

"You look like crap," she said.

"Speak for yourself," I replied. "Although, I do feel like I got run over. Malize's sword…"

She shook her head. "Malize's sword didn't do this," she said. "Heavenly light isn't like hellfire. It can only harm demons."

It figured that the angels wouldn't have anything that could harm one of their own. I wished I could have been more thankful for that, but the truth of it left me more concerned. "Then why do I feel so lousy?" I asked.

"You know why, signore," Dante said, walking in through the front door that I hadn't heard open. I was in worse shape than I had thought.

"The Beast?" I asked.

He nodded. He looked like he was faring much better than we were. At least one of us wasn't a total disaster. "Your power comes from Purgatory. This whole time I believed the power was part of mine, but as we've learned it belonged to the Beast. He pulled some of it back into his cage before I was able to stop it. He also siphoned some of it away from both of you when Sarah stabbed you." He looked around. "Where is she?"

"She's upstairs, sleeping," I said. I wasn't going to tell him what I had promised I would do for her. "She feels terrible."

He didn't show any emotion. "What she feels doesn't matter," he said. "She has to live, as do both of you, until we can trap the Beast once more."

His words made me bristle. "Doesn't matter?" I asked, raising

my voice.

He raised a hand, and I was paralyzed. I didn't have the strength to fight it. "No, signore," he said. "It doesn't matter. What is done is done and the Beast is free in this world. There is no going backward, so we must put our attention on that, and only on that. I am sorry if this is disturbing to you, but we must keep ourselves focused."

He released me, and I nodded. He really wasn't going to like what I had promised her, but there was nothing I could do about that right now.

"Okay," Charis said. "So, any ideas on how to trap something that it took the two most powerful angels years to figure out how to contain, and do it in a matter of weeks?"

Dante lowered his head. "I'm sorry to say, I do not know. I haven't had to work without Mr. Ross in quite some time. I know his assistance was in some cases a ruse, and in some cases to further his own ends, but it was helpful all the same. I haven't had time to determine how to gather the information we need."

He had a point. What the Beast had done, he had done for his own purpose, but it had been instrumental in helping us to create and maintain the balance. Without him, we were short on sources for this kind of information. I could picture him sitting in his cage, bathing in the power that had been released, laughing at us.

"What about Malize?" I asked Charis. "He helped us before, and he was the one who helped trap the Beast the first time."

"He can't leave the cave," she replied. "He is the forgotten for a reason."

"What reason?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. When everything seemed so impossible, it was the best thing I could think of to do. "I guess it doesn't matter why," I said. "We can at least ask him about what we should do."

I heard soft footsteps, and a creak from one of the step's wooden boards. All of our heads turned to Sarah. She approached us slowly, her empty eye sockets swollen and red, her hair a ratty nest, my shirt still wrapped around her wrist, and the thin dress the Beast had put her in stained with blood.

"We can put him in the Box," she said. "Put him in the Box, and lose it for all time."

I walked over to Sarah and wrapped my arms around her. “How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I’ll survive,” she said with a weak smile, returning my embrace. I let her go and turned back to Dante and Charis.

“What is this Box she is speaking of, signore?” Dante asked.

“Avriel’s Box,” Charis answered. “Rebecca let Abaddon and the archangel free, in order to use it to catch Landon.” She smiled and looked at me. “It didn’t work out very well.”

Dante looked like he was going to faint. “You have Avriel’s Box?” he asked.

“I have it,” Charis said. “I left it with the Templars, back in Thailand.”

It was another bit of news Dante wasn’t prepared for. He swung around to face her, his face turning crimson with anger. He started to raise his hand, and then paused, staring at her. He pursed his lips, and his body slumped.

“Dante?” I asked.

He held his hand out towards me. “My feelings are as unimportant as the girl’s,” he said. He looked back up at Charis. “I am beginning to understand many things. Why did you not heed my warning about the Templars?”

“Where would we be today if I had?” she asked.

Dante sighed. “Avriel’s Box,” he said. “That means the demon Abaddon is also loose.” He stroked his chin and sighed again. “I never thought I would say it, but I think in this case, it’s actually a good thing.”

“Abaddon is nothing to be trifled with,” Charis said. “Lucifer created him with the memory of the Beast, imbuing him with his own hunger for death and destruction.”

“Yes,” Dante replied, “but he is still a demon, and can be destroyed or returned to Hell.”

“We know that Avriel is in the sewers beneath Paris, and the demon is there with him,” I said. “So, we get rid of Abaddon, we grab Avriel, we take him to Thailand, and he shows us how to work the Box. It seems simple enough.” Simple, like solving the Riemann hypothesis.

Dante laughed. “Do you know how to kill Abaddon, signore?” he asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Neither did the seraphim. That is why they trapped him in the

Box. Of all of them, only Avriel had the strength of will to even get close enough to strike, but what would he be striking? No one can pierce Abaddon's veil, to find the creature beneath it. He chose to trap him, and he was ensnared as well."

"I can Command the demon," Sarah said. "He will listen to me."

Dante turned back towards her. "Why would he listen to you, bambina?"

"Because it's our only choice," she replied.

Dante shook his head. "A choice that you force us to make," he said, shifting his attention to me. "How can you be sure you can trust her, signore? There is a reason the true diuscrucis were hunted."

Sarah looked at me, her expression blank while she waited for my reply. I understood Dante's concern, because I had seen the fears play out in Sarah's Source. We had come to an agreement though, one that I could only hope would help keep her opposing nature at bay.

"I trust her," I said. "That will have to be enough."

Dante's eyes bored into me, and he looked like he wanted to say something else, but again he let it go. "Very well," he said. "I will return to Purgatory and see if there is anything I can do from there. Remember, signore, your power is diminished. You must be more cautious than you are accustomed to."

"Wait a second," I said. "You're just going to leave us out here? We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Not true, signore," he said. "I dropped you off here because I knew this place was safe, but you are only a hundred miles or so from Florence. There is a demon transport rift there that Charis can use to get you back to Paris. I would take you, of course, but I've already caused too much damage to the equilibrium. To do much more would be a boon to the Beast."

He walked over to Sarah, who gazed at him with her Sight, her face remaining emotionless.

"You have a chance to do great things," he said. "Be strong, and believe in Landon. He is the anchor in the face of this oncoming storm."

A smile began to spread on Sarah's face, and she nodded. A moment later, the poet disappeared.

"Let me see your wrist," I said to Sarah, reaching out and gently unwrapping my shirt from it. It was crusty and stiff from all of the

blood that had seeped into it and dried, and I tossed it off into the corner.

I had been expecting to be greeted with a deep gash and a lot of scabbing on a wound that was too straight and fine to knit back together with ease, but was pleased to discover that Malize's sword was as kind to mortals as it was to angels. There was a familiar white line where the cut had been made, but otherwise the damage was healed.

"It's fine," Sarah said. "The only thing painful about it is the memory."

I knew what she meant. "It's still one less thing to worry about. The next order of business is to find some new threads. I'm not really feeling like going around shirtless, and you definitely can't go out in public like that."

Even if the dress hadn't been torn and bloodstained, it wasn't suitable. The material was just thick enough and long enough to qualify as clothing, leaving enough to the imagination to almost make it worse than nothing at all.

I hadn't heard Charis move, but suddenly she was next to me, holding out a crumpled mess of plaid. "I found these stashed away in the attic," she said. "They're old, and they smell like moth balls, but you can do what you want with them." Her eyes lowered to Sarah's feet. "I didn't find any shoes." She handed a flannel shirt to each of us.

Sarah took the shirt and uncrumpled it. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." she said, unlatching the buttons. "I can't get this thing off fast enough."

She pulled the dress over her head without warning, eager to replace it with the shirt. I turned my head away, trying to hide my embarrassment and drawing an amused smile from Charis. It did seem kind of silly to be ashamed by a little bit of flesh when we were faced with something so much worse. I took my own shirt and slipped it on.

Whoever they had belonged to must have been overweight, because they hung from both of us like a circus tent. I focused, forcing the cloth to shrink down to a more manageable size. Where before it had felt like I was drinking from a river, now the power fed into me like a stream. Charis must have noticed my look of concern, because she put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed it before using her own energy to convert Sarah's tent into a flannel

dress. The end result actually looked kind of cute on her.

"There's a barn out back with a rusted old Fiat in it," Charis said. "The car won't start on it's own, but I'm sure we can change its mind. Dante said there's a rift in Florence. I hope I can reach Vilya by the time we get there, because I don't know how to work it without her."

I closed my eyes and called out to Josette again. I could see the frayed edges of our connection, and I knew she wouldn't be able to respond. Only time would heal the damage, and it was the one thing we couldn't spare any of. I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out my cellphone, happy to find the hardened device was still intact, unhappy to see that the battery was dead. Not that it was likely there would be any reception out here. Obi would have to wait.

"So, I guess we head for Florence," I said. I took Sarah's hands in mine. "We'll do it after we get the Box, okay?" I asked. "The Beast probably knows we have it, and if we've thought about putting him in it, I'm sure he's thought about it too."

She nodded. "I know," she said. "I can wait. I'm okay right now."

I could feel Charis' confusion, but there was no time to explain.

"Charis?" Sarah said, coming down off the last step and standing right in front of her. They were nearly the same height, but she looked so small. Did Rebecca forget that she was mortal, and needed to eat? Did she forget it herself?

"Yes?" Her expression was warm, sympathetic. It didn't have to be, after what Sarah had done to her. She didn't have the same history with her that I did. Then again, we had connected, so in some ways she did.

"I'm sorry," Sarah said, her voice creaking more softly than the wooden floorboards had. "For stabbing you. For everything."

Charis didn't say anything. She reached out and put her arms around her, holding her in a warm embrace. She looked up at me past her shoulder, and I felt a pang in my soul. I couldn't name it, or maybe didn't want to name it, but I couldn't ignore it either.

"We need to go," I said to them.

Charis gave Sarah one last squeeze and then straightened up. "The barn is out back, we can go out through the kitchen." She took Sarah's hand to lead the way. A soft tug, but she didn't move. That was when I noticed her gaze was transfixed.

I should have felt the change in my senses, noticed the new presence in my Sight. I should have at least paid attention to the spill of light that had been coming in through the open front door, and how it was suddenly blocked.

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3

“Diuscrucis,” the voice roared from the doorway.

I followed the long shadow from the floor to its caster. Way too late, I could See. An angel. A powerful angel. He wasn’t alone. “Melody,” I said. “Who’s your friend?”

I couldn’t see her behind the larger seraph’s silhouette, but I knew she was there.

“Initiate Melody will remain silent,” the angel said. “I brought her only as witness.”

“Witness to what?” I asked.

The angel stepped into the room. He was a handsome one, with a square jaw and short blonde hair that was graying around the edges. He wore the toga-like sash that the seraphim sported to fly, and it revealed a warrior’s body beneath, all muscle and grit. Melody trailed in behind him, her expression one of fear.

“My name is Callus,” he said. “I was sent to speak to this one, after it was brought to my attention that one of the Canaan Blades had been found and activated. It belonged to one whose name we cannot recall, but we do know he was not the one who used it.

Initiate Melody was very close to where it was sensed, and her Confession revealed your involvement. I required her as witness, so she might prove her innocence in this."

Charis and I stole a glance at each other. She had said that that archangels would know if Malize's sword had been used. Obviously, they hadn't wasted any time investigating. Still, I found it a little discomforting that Callus had forced Melody to Confess. It was more than that, though. He had forced her to Confess, and he was still more concerned with a sword than he was with the Beast.

There was no sense beating around the bush. "Are you a servant of the Beast?" I asked him. He could attack, or he could tell the truth. He could try to lie, but then he would be revealing the truth.

Callus looked at me as if I had just spat in his face. "Are you suggesting that I am disloyal to my Lord?" he asked, getting right into my face. I could feel his warm breath on my temple, and see the veins in his neck pulsing.

"You didn't answer the question," Charis said.

There was another way to find out if he was a servant. Angels weren't allowed to initiate violence.

His head spun towards her, and his eyes narrowed. A smile grew slowly along his face. I peeked over at Melody. She was still standing in the doorway, and she looked like she would have been super happy to be anywhere else.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Spare me your words, and follow your heart, Templar."

Charis stared at him, her eyes locking onto his. Her body tensed up, her hands balling into fists, and then she relaxed. "He's no servant," she said.

"Then why such an interest in a sword?" I asked. "When the Beast is freed to this world."

He backed away, and motioned for Melody to join him. "The Beast is a myth," he said. "A story told by those who are lacking in more productive pursuits. The sword is real."

"I tried to tell him," Melody started to say.

"Silence, Initiate," Callus snapped. "You may speak when I ask it of you."

Angel or not, Callus was a jerk. It was an all too common theme with the seraphim elite. "I hate to break it to you, my friend," I said. "The Beast is real, and the door to his cage is hanging open."

"I am not your friend, diuscrucis," he replied. "The only reason

you live is because I am not strong enough to defeat two of you on my own, and they asked me to come only to parley."

I held back my laugh. He didn't know we'd been hamstrung. He didn't know he could probably cut us all down with barely a twitch. I felt Sarah shift next to me. Well, maybe not. I didn't know if she could Command an angel like Callus, but she had somehow managed to overpower Rebecca. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

"So, you don't believe me?" I asked.

"About the Beast?" He shook his head. "No."

It may have seemed like an inconsequential answer, but it brought our true plight into crisp focus. The Beast's power was growing, while ours had been diminished. Survival was going to be tricky enough, and near impossible if we couldn't hope to get the other Divine off our backs. The fact that the archangels didn't seem to think the Beast was a real thing was going to be trouble.

"You haven't noticed an uptick in fallen angels lately?" I asked.

"It has been noticed," he said. His eyes shifted, slicing into Sarah. It was the first time he had even acknowledged her standing there, but there was nothing warm about his expression. "Someone has been Commanding them. No demon can Command a seraph."

He knew what she was, and he knew what she had done. Was he trying to provoke an attack? For someone who believed he couldn't win, he wasn't being very smart.

"The sword," I said, trying to shift the conversation.

He smirked. "Do not think that I would not like anything more than to take your 'sister' and remove her head, as all creatures carrying the blood of Hell deserve," he said. "Do not think I wouldn't like to do the same to you. It is difficult enough to be in your presence, I pray that my Lord will give me strength to maintain my vows, and grant me eternal peace should you choose to defend your miserable wretch of a sibling."

He *was* trying to provoke me. He had said he didn't think he could win, and he had been telling the truth. Angels didn't play games, so what the hell was going on? Was he really just so filled with hate that he couldn't control himself?

I felt Sarah shivering next to me, and her hand clenched my arm and squeezed tightly enough that her nails broke my skin. This asshole was undoing everything I had worked to achieve.

"The sword?" I repeated, making sure my voice was calm and

even. If Sarah made a move, I would need to be quick to stop her before she freed him to act. He might have been feeling he would martyr himself, but I knew what the real outcome would be.

"The Canaan Blades," he said, recognizing that I held the restraint to dismiss his jibes, "have been lost for many thousands of years. We've been searching for them, my brothers, sisters, and I since that time. I've been ordered to find out how you obtained it, and ask for its return."

"You're *asking* for it back?" I said.

He sighed. "As I said, I would prefer to rip it from your dead hand, but it has been made clear to me that retrieving the Blade is more important. There's a risk involved with attempting to destroy you, a risk the archangels are unwilling to take, but I would have been. Seeing as how you won't allow me to take that risk, however… yes, I am asking." He spat the words like he had taken in a mouthful of old coffee. I could tell that it killed him to say it.

"Why do you want it back so badly?" I asked.

"The Blade was one of three forged by the hand of the Lord, Himself in the light of Heaven," he said. "It bears properties that make it unsuitable to remain in this realm."

I had been stabbed with the sword. There was nothing special about pain and blood, but then, it was only supposed to work on full-blooded demons. "What kind of properties?"

He laughed. "I'm not about to tell you what makes the Blades special," he said. "It's bad enough you've somehow managed to acquire one, and even worse that you have used it. Now, will you Confess how you came to hold the Blade, and surrender it to me, or shall I return to report your refusal?"

I knew how badly he would love to tell the archangels that I had refused him. I looked at Melody. She was standing with her arms crossed, her eyes pointed at the floor. If I didn't give him something, he might cast the blame for it onto her. For all her brashness, she didn't seem like the fallen type.

"I can't tell you who we got it from. His name is not to be spoken or remembered by the seraphim," I said. "If that doesn't mean anything to you, ask your boss. I can tell you that Melody was there because she was assigned to work with Thomas, and that's it. It's not her fault he decided to do the right thing and forego Heaven in order to help me fight the Beast. The Beast you claim doesn't exist, who just so happens to be the one who has your sword. We

lost it trying to escape from him."

Callus stared at me, his jaw clenching and softening while he attempted to control himself. "You lie, diuscrucis," he said at last. He tilted his head, and then smiled. "It seems I may not have to return to report you. Perhaps I will get my wish after all."

I focused on my Sight, sensing more angels approaching the farmhouse. There wasn't much they could do if I refused to fight.

"I will ask you one more time, diuscrucis. Surrender the Canaan Blade."

I held my hands out to the side. "I don't have it," I said.

Two of the angels reached the doorway, coming in behind Callus. One was old, with long white hair and a pristinely kept beard. The other was in the body of a ten-year-old boy, with a mop of brown hair and a cherubic face.

"Callus?" the younger one asked.

"Eli. He will not surrender the Blade," Callus said. "He insists that the Beast is real, that it is free and that it has the sword."

"Truly?" Eli asked.

Callus nodded. "Have you ever heard anything so preposterous? You must have known he would refuse to turn it over, since you brought so many brothers with you."

Eli smiled. "Yes," he said. "We need to kill them all."

"It would be an honor, brother," Callus said, "but he cannot be provoked."

Eli looked at me, and smiled. A smile I knew, and would never forget, no matter whose face it appeared on. "I bet I can provoke him," he said, his eyes revealing only malicious intent.

Somehow, the Beast was inside Eli. Somehow, it had taken control of him. The angel hadn't fallen, which could only mean he was being controlled against his will. Or was he? What if the seraph had let the Beast in? Did it matter?

"Go ahead and try," I said, focusing, trying to pull as much power to me as I could.

The Beast took a deep breath. "Mmmm. I can smell it. I can feel it. Enjoy it while you can, kid." He moved his attention to Sarah. "I understand you're a little confused, had a little case of cold feet, but the offer still stands."

I felt Sarah's grip on my arm tighten even more. I knew the Beast's words would be registering somewhere within her. I knew that there would be a battle raging in response. He had said he

could provoke me, and it took all of my strength to resist.

"Sarah," the Beast said. "Think about it. The power, the freedom. No more being split in half." He was the destroyer, and he was trying to ruin her psyche.

"Eli?" Callus asked. "What are you doing?"

The Beast didn't answer. He kept looking at Sarah, and spilling his garbage. "You will be a goddess in my universe," he said. "I'll be the only thing above you."

The way he said it, I could feel myself losing control. My body started to quiver in anger.

"Eli?" Callus asked again. "Melody? Where are you going?"

I had been so focused on the Beast that I hadn't noticed Melody backing away, reaching the door where the other angel waited. Was he a servant, or just an unwitting ally? I had no way to know.

"Come on, Sarah," the Beast shouted. "Forget about them. You were born to be their master."

"Eli," Callus said. "I don't…"

"He's the goddamned Beast, you idiot," Charis shouted, unable to hold back anymore.

Callus' eyes widened, as though he finally decided to believe; just in time for a cursed dagger to appear in Eli's hand, and disappear into his neck.

"I tried to do it your way," the Beast said, wrenching the dagger from the seraph. Callus dropped to the floor. "I don't like your way."

It all happened in a blur of instinct and emotion. The Beast, lunging for Sarah, trying to grab her. Charis, lunging for the Beast, her own dagger in hand. Melody, twisting away from the angel she was standing next to and narrowly avoiding being skewered herself. It was all so fast, and at the same time so slow. Sarah was already gripping my shoulder, so I pulled myself forward and turned, wrenching her out of the Beast's path, while at the same time pulling a poker from its resting spot next to the fireplace, and sending it hurtling into the angel that had attacked Melody. It impaled the hand with the sword, forcing him to drop it. The attack would cause him to fall, leaving her free to act at will.

The Beast's lunge struck only air, and he was just quick enough to regain his balance and avoid Charis' dagger. He smiled again, that stupid, confident smile, and brought the dagger around, cutting into her arm. She grunted and kicked out, and the Beast flew

backward to slam into the wall.

I felt the rest of the angels on the move, two coming in from the kitchen, two upstairs, and two more circling around to the front. Melody had dispatched her opponent, so I started moving forward.

"No," Sarah said, pulling against me. "The kitchen. We need to get to the car."

Not that a car could outrun a seraph, but it would offer some measure of protection. I reversed course, beckoning with my eyes for Melody to follow.

"Yes, get to the car," the Beast laughed. He stood against the wall, the dagger in his hand. "You think a car will save you? I found you here. I'll find you anywhere you go. I'm only getting stronger, Landon. You can't stop me now, and I'm only getting stronger. You might as well…"

His speech turned into a harsh gurgle when Charis' dagger pierced his throat and pinned him to the wall. "See…you… in New York," he sputtered. His eyes flashed pure white, and then returned to the seraphim gold. He'd abandoned ship.

Charis rushed over and pulled the blade out, taking the one the Beast had been holding, as well as the angel Callus' sword. I could hear the footsteps in the kitchen, and I could sense them in the rooms upstairs. We were getting boxed in.

The two from the kitchen appeared first. They didn't know the Beast had started it. They didn't know we should have been safe. They came in with the swords raised, anger in their eyes at the death of their friends. I tensed, ready to attack, as did Charis.

"Hold your attack," Sarah said to them. She had her hand raised, as if she was directing the Command forward. The two angels paused, and anger turned to confusion.

A breeze, and the two in the front had arrived. Sarah turned towards them. "Hold your attack," she said again. They too held up.

"Come on," I said, taking Sarah by the hand and leading her around the angels in the kitchen. Charis trailed behind.

"Melody, are you coming?" Charis asked, noticing the angel didn't follow.

She shook her head. "No. I'll stay and explain this to them. I don't know if they'll believe it, but I have to try." Footsteps on the stairs next to us. Melody stepped in front of them. "Gaius, Lucas, wait," she said.

"Landon," Sarah gasped. "Hurry, I can't hold this for long."

I had seen the anger. I didn't know if they would give Melody time to explain. I led us out the back at a run, towards a small old barn fifty feet behind the house. The doors swung open as we approached. The Fiat was going to be a tight fit, but it was better than nothing. I focused on the door to pull it open, and helped Sarah slip into the tiny back seat. Sweat was pouring from her forehead, and all of the muscles were bunched up and throbbing.

"You drive," I said to Charis, knowing she had years more experience then I did. I did my best Luke Duke impression, sliding across the hood to the passenger side and falling around into the seat.

"That's it," Sarah said, with a heaving sigh. Charis put her hand onto the starter and closed her eyes. A moment later, the two angels from the kitchen burst out the back of the house, with Melody trailing behind them.

"I don't want to kill them," I said. "The balance."

"I've almost got it," Charis replied. The angels were getting closer, and I could hear Melody shouting for them to wait. I doubted they would listen, especially after they had been Commanded by a true diuscrucis. It was a shame, but I could imagine the trouble Melody was going to be in over not trying to kill Sarah herself.

They were getting close, but Charis got the car running, the engine sputtering to life. She threw the car into gear and pulled out of the barn as fast as the machine would allow. The angels followed behind as we drove along the grass towards the front of the house. I was sure they would go airborne, but Melody finally managed to catch up, and she tackled them, pulling them down into a heap.

"I didn't even like her the first time we met," I said, looking up into the rearview mirror and watching the three angels rise. "I hope they don't punish her too badly."

Charis snorted. "I hope they try listening to her," she said, "but I'm not holding my breath."

I turned my head back to look at Sarah. She was laying across the seat, rubbing her temples. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"I hope so," she replied.

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I turned and checked behind us again, scanning the sky for any sign of the angels. The fact that we'd been on the road for fifteen minutes and hadn't caught sight of them was the best news we'd had. I didn't know if Melody had convinced them on the topic of the Beast, but she had at least gotten them off our tail.

"I should take the wheel," I said. I checked in on Sarah before turning my attention to Charis. She had fallen asleep with her hands still on her head. She looked peaceful for the moment, at least.

"You're sweet, Landon," she replied. "I don't mind driving."

A simple prefix, but it registered. Could the timing have been any worse? "I'm sure you don't, but priority number one is to get you back in touch with your evil side. We're stuck traveling like mortals until you do, and I'm willing to bet the odds of us making it from here to New York in a jet without being torn from the sky are only slightly above zero."

Charis rolled the car to a stop, right in the middle of the road. Not that it mattered, there was nothing around us but pasture, and we hadn't seen another soul yet.

“You have a point,” she said, pushing open the driver’s side door. “Did I just hear you say New York?”

I swung open my own door and got out of the car. We both circled around the front, meeting at the hood. Charis still looked exhausted, and I was sure I did too, but it didn’t take anything away from her beauty. I had a thought, and discarded it. It was bad timing for sure. I crossed on the outside, meeting her eyes on the way by, giving her a small smile. We finished the circuit and took our new places. I put the car back in drive and eased us forward.

“The Beast said ‘see you in New York,’” I said. “He’s going after Obi.”

“How can you be sure?” Charis asked. “He could have said that to distract you.”

“He wasn’t lying.”

“Well, no; but he’s not Divine. I don’t think it works on him.”

I peeked up into the rearview again, just to be sure. Nothing. “It probably doesn’t,” I agreed. “I’d rather be wrong and have Obi and maybe Izak with us, than be right and have one or both of them dead. We’re at a huge disadvantage, because the Beast has an army of servants he can send to do his dirty work. We’re what? Seven, including Dante?”

“If this is a pep talk, you’re doing it wrong,” Charis said. “I know you care about your friend, but it’s a huge risk. Without Obi, we can still trap the Beast. Without the Box, we can’t.”

Her first comment made me smirk, her second sunk my battleship. She was right, and there wasn’t much getting around it. “Maybe we should split up,” I suggested. “Divide and conquer.”

Charis shook her head. “For one thing, you need Vilya to travel the rifts. For another, that could be playing right into the Beast’s hands. It would certainly make things easier for him if he could separate us.”

I took a deep breath and sighed. “I just hope Obi and Thomas got back with Izak. He’s the safest harbor they’ve got. Considering our current situation, he’s the safest harbor we could get too.”

“Thailand, Landon,” Charis said. “I’m sorry, but we need to get to Thailand.”

“I know, I know.” There was something else I needed to do in New York, but that would have to wait too.

We spent the next fifteen minutes riding in silence. Charis closed her eyes and tried to relax and rest, and to put back together the

tattered strands of her connection to Vilya. I kept checking the mirror every twenty seconds or so, until I was satisfied the angels weren't going to pursue. Why would they? They had enough of a mess to clean up back at the farmhouse.

I was just beginning to settle into some kind of less alert state when I heard Sarah start gasping in the back seat. I reached up and pulled the mirror down so I could see her in it. The reflection yielded only her torso, but it was convulsing erratically, clenching and softening in chaos. Charis must have been sleeping, because she hadn't noticed. I pulled the car to a stop.

"Sarah," I whispered, turning around in the seat and leaning over so I could see her face. Her hair was caked to her face in a layer of sweat, and her hands had dug into the cushioning so hard they had broken through the cracked leather surface. "Sarah," I said again.

"No," she said softly. "That can't be. That can't be how it ends."

I realized not all of the moisture was sweat. She was tearful, pleading with something I couldn't see. I didn't understand how her ability to see the future worked. I didn't know if it was ever accurate, or just a glimpse of some of the possible threads. I didn't even know if anything she was seeing was the truth, or if it was her evil alternate haunting her dreams.

"Sarah," I said again, a little more forcefully.

It didn't wake her, but it did wake Charis. Her eyes snapped open and she spun around in the seat, joining me in my vigil.

"Sarah," she said, her voice a gentle coo.

"No. I don't want to do it," Sarah cried. "I don't want to. It doesn't have to be this way. Please."

Charis and I looked at each other. "We have to wake her gently," I said, maneuvering back around and pushing open the car door. Charis followed me around to the driver's side, where I shoved the seat forward so I could get to Sarah.

"No. No. No. Show me something else," Sarah whimpered. She released her grip on the cushions and started punching herself in the chest. "Show me something else."

"She's going to hurt herself," Charis said.

I reached in and put my hand on her shoulder. As soon as I touched her, her entire body shot out stiff straight in a major convulsion, and then toppled back to the seat. Her head twisted towards me.

“Get away!” she Commanded.

Her Commands had never worked on me before. She had tried a few times, most recently right before she’d been taken by her father. I understood what the power felt like, the pressure in my head, the compulsion in my soul. I’d always been strong enough to fight it. Until today.

Against my will, I started backing up. Her face tracked me, and I could feel her forcing me further and further from the car, across the street and out into one of the fields. I closed my eyes and focused, pushing back against her, trying to resist. I couldn’t do it. Not when she was so agitated.

“Please,” I heard her cry out to Charis. “Please, leave me alone.” Charis started backing up too. Sarah climbed out of the car.

In that moment, I felt nothing but sadness and pity. She stood there in front of the car in her flannel dress, her hair stuck to her face, her expression one of pure misery. She held her hands down to the side and put her head towards the ground.

“Sarah, please let me go,” I said, mustering the energy to speak. “I can help you.”

“I saw it,” she said. “I saw it.” She dropped to her knees, burying her face in her hands.

“Saw what?” I heard Charis ask.

“I saw it,” she repeated.

“Sarah,” I said. “Let me go. Let me help you.”

The compulsion dropped. She had let me go. I ran over to her, sliding on the ground to embrace her. I held her there for a few minutes while she sobbed out her fears, and then let her go.

“Landon,” she said. “I’m sorry.” She looked up at Charis. “I’m sorry.”

“What happened?” I asked.

She used her sleeve to wipe away some of the moisture from her face. “You know that I see… ahead. Things that haven’t happened yet. They aren’t always things that will happen, but are usually things that do happen. Except… they’re blurry. Like shadows of the future, or a silhouette of what’s to come. I saw you defeat the archfiend in New York, but I never saw mother’s sacrifice to you. I want so much to speak to her.”

“Sarah, I…”

“No, it’s okay. I know you can’t right now. I know what the Beast did to you. I can See the change in you, the way your power

has shifted. I can See mother, and the demon in there too, but they are so scattered right now. You need to sleep, for days maybe, but there isn't any time."

I hadn't expected her to be able to See in such detail. My own Sight was an overall understanding of what different Divine souls looked like, and it presented itself in temperature and emotion. She had to be getting deeper, or maybe higher resolution, like a camera with more megapixels.

"So you saw the future?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I felt so strongly about helping the Beast. I was sure it would happen. So much of it did, but not all. Like you said, it's a potential future, and the choices we make can change it at any time. You helped me make a different choice, a better choice." She smiled weakly.

"I'm glad I could help," I said, "but I don't understand. What did you see that was upsetting you so much, that you were able to Command both of us?"

She turned her face back towards the pavement. "It was so real," she said. "So much more… I don't know… true? I felt like it would happen, no matter what choice I made. That it was the future that would come to pass."

"What did you see?"

She put her hand on my shoulder. "I don't know if I should tell you," she said. "I'm so afraid of it happening. I can't imagine anything worse. What if telling you makes it happen?"

There was no way to know. "What if not telling me makes it happen?" I replied. "If I know what it is, maybe we can work to prevent it."

Her chest was heaving, her heartbeat ratcheting up with the anxiety of the situation. She squeezed my arm tighter and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

"Sarah," I said. "It's okay. You don't have to tell me. You'll know if it's happening the way you saw. You'll be able to make the choice."

She bit her lower lip and nodded. "It is my choice, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Always."

She took a few more deep breaths. "We need to get to Florence," she said. She turned to Charis. "You aren't as damaged as Landon. Maybe because there's only one in there with you. You'll still need

rest."

Charis smiled. "I'll rest," she said. "Let's get to Florence."

I got to my feet, and helped Sarah to hers. Charis started circling back around to the passenger side.

"Hop in, kiddo," I said, waving her into the back seat. She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me down towards her.

"Brother," she whispered in my ear. "I didn't want her to hear. To hear what I saw." Her breathing was ragged, her fear of the vision obvious.

"I saw her die," she said. "I saw you die. I killed you."

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The rest of the drive to Florence was tough, with Sarah's final words to me before we had regained our journey rattling around in my head. She was sure she was going to kill both Charis and me. She was more certain of it than she had been of helping the Beast. It wasn't that she wanted to, or even felt compelled to, but she truly believed that she would. Did that mean the Beast was going to win? She had been concerned that telling me would cause bad things to happen, and maybe it could. If I allowed the information to seep into my psyche and convince me not to try as hard, not to fight as hard, could that be how I wound up dead?

Shadows. That was the future that she saw. In the moments we had before getting back into the car, I had asked her how she did it. She said she didn't know, only that I was dust, and Charis was dust, and our blood was on her hands. It would have bothered me more, but I was resisting the urge to believe, knowing full well we had already altered one of her perceived futures. There was nothing to suggest we couldn't do it again.

I was glad Charis had taken the opportunity to go back to

resting. She didn't notice my sweaty palms, or my sure-to-be-distracted expression. She rested in the seat next to me, her head lolled to the right, a thin line of drool running out of the corner of her mouth and onto her chin. There was something so normal about it, so perfect and yet surreal. Wouldn't it be so much better if we were sitting on a couch somewhere, watching a crappy movie? How much would I want to kiss her when she woke?

The thought was troubling, and getting harder to shake with each soft breath that escaped her, with each gentle effort to try to pull the spittle back in. We had shared everything in the cave, when she had connected her soul with mine. I knew everything about her, and she knew everything about me. How could I not feel something for someone who I had known for over two hundred years? I was there for every fault, every weakness, every evil deed. I had also seen her strength, her goodness, and her ferociously loyal love. So, she had been the one who had killed me. She had also brought me back to life. It was balance.

I cast one more glance her way, admiring the shape of her face, and then checked in on Sarah. She was in the back seat, head down, her breathing even. She hadn't said anything since we had gotten in the car, and I didn't expect her to. She had a greater burden to bear than I did.

Florence was an Italian city, which meant that it just kind of snuck up on you. Nestled along the Arno river, it didn't appear in the distance as some great metropolis, but rather just appeared at the end of an endless string of farms and pastures, from a vast quantity of wheat and grass to the hustle and bustle of one of the most famous medieval centers. I'd never been here before, and driving through the streets, looking around at the architecture and history, I was more amazed than someone in my position should have been. Wasn't being Divine more amazing than sculpted stone? I wasn't so sure.

I pulled us up to the curb of the San Gallo Palace Hotel, pushing my focus to glamour the car and its riders as a trio of wealthy tourists. I couldn't actually change our clothes, but I pushed the image of finery and gold accouterments. It was enough to fool a mortal. The vehicle took its last breath and died as I eased it to a stop, and the attendant came over and opened my door.

"Good morning, signore," I said, finding a bit of joy in being able to use Dante's line.

“Good morning,” he replied. “Can I take your luggage?”

I smiled. “No luggage, my friend,” I said. “We just flew in for the weekend. We’re going to do some shopping to take care of our necessities.”

He returned the grin. “Excellent, sir,” he said, laughing. “I’m sure your wife and daughter will be very pleased.”

“I’m sure they will,” I agreed. “Honey,” I shouted to Charis. “It’s time to wake up now. We’re here.”

Her eyes opened and she sat up, using her wrist to wipe the drool from her chin. Sarah had heard me too, and she lifted her head to see where we were.

“Welcome to Florence,” I said to them. The attendant helped Charis from the car, and I took Sarah’s hand to pull her from the back. “Don’t worry,” I whispered to her. She bit her lip and nodded.

“Please head on inside, sir,” the attendant said. “I will take care of your car.”

I reached out and took Charis’ hand as she came around the Fiat and led my two girls inside. How I wished we really were on a shopping spree vacation. It was easy to picture Charis as my wife, and even though Sarah called me ‘brother,’ I already felt like more of a father to her.

“Name?” The clerk asked when I approached the front desk. He was an older man with a ring of white hair around a bald top, a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on the end of his nose, and a decades old suit on his meek frame. At least he kept it ironed. I reached into my pants pocket, feeling around the cellphone, and pulled out a Taylor, Inc. corporate credit card. Seeing it in my hand forced me to remember Rachel, and I felt a twang of guilt and regret as I handed it over to him.

“I don’t have a reservation, signore,” I said. “If you have a room, I can pay.”

He took the card. “Of course, sir,” he replied. He started typing into the computer. “I will still need a name.”

“Taylor,” I replied. “Justin Taylor.”

The clerk typed it in. I took a peek outside, seeing that the attendant was still struggling to get the car started. Charis noticed, following my gaze and then looking back at me with an amused lifted eyebrow.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she replied, her voice hinting at her mirth.

“I’m sorry sir,” the clerk said. “It seems your card is being declined. Might you have another?”

That was fast. I hadn’t expected a company as large as Rachel’s to be organized enough to cut me off in a matter of hours. There had to be someone else involved on that front. I took the card back from him and dug around in my pocket.

“Excuse me a moment,” I said. I turned to Sarah. “Do you mind?” I asked. “It’s okay if you don’t want to, if it makes it harder to resist her.”

“I don’t mind,” she replied. “We have a need.”

I thought she was going to Command the clerk to give us a key, but she didn’t. Instead, she walked outside and started talking to the attendant, still sitting in the Fiat. He smiled at her, and then reached into his pocket and handed her his wallet. She kissed his cheek, and came back inside.

“It’s better to use a card,” she said, handing me a credit card. “It will make it easier when we check out.”

I was a little concerned about the ease of her deviousness, but she had told me she was okay. I handed the card to the clerk, glamouring it to look similar to the one I had already tried to give him. He took it without suspicion and ran it through.

“I’ve put you in a room with two queen beds, if that is okay with you sir,” the clerk said, handing me two key-cards. “Room 314.”

“It’s fine,” I replied.

“The stairs are over there,” he said, pointing. “My apologies, but it is an old hotel, so we don’t have an elevator.”

“It’s no trouble,” I said. “Come, my lovelies.”

Sarah giggled at the term, and took my hand. Charis walked beside us. We climbed the steps and made our way into the room.

It was pretty standard hotel fare, two queen beds, a desk, a television, and a bathroom. It didn’t stand out in any way, but that was fine with me.

“So, we’re here,” Sarah said. “Now what?”

They both looked at me.

“I’m going to go out and see if I can get a battery for my phone. Failing that, an internet cafe. I need to reach Obi, make sure he’s okay, and warn him about the Beast. You two are going to stay here. Charis, you need to rest. We’re dead in the water without Vilya. Sarah, you keep her safe.”

“You.. You’re trusting me to keep her safe?” Sarah asked.

I was about to reply, but Charis took care of it for me. “It doesn’t matter if he trusts you,” she said. “I do.” It was well done.

“But I don’t deserve it. After what I did.”

“Nonsense. You aren’t the only one who’s done something they wished they hadn’t. We need you, Sarah. I need you to watch over me. You can keep anyone, mortal or Divine from hurting us until you can wake me. I know you can.”

“Okay,” Sarah said. “I’ll wake you if I See anyone coming.”

“I know,” Charis replied. She walked over to me, and surprised me by leaning up and putting her forehead against mine. “You be careful.”

I pressed my head forward against hers. “I appreciate your concern. I’ll be fine.”

She swung her head around to kiss me on the cheek, handed me one of the cursed daggers, and backed away. The warmth of her lips on my face sent a shiver through my spine.

“I’ll be back soon,” I said, sticking the blade in my belt, and then turning and heading out the door.

The attendant had enlisted a bellhop to assist him in moving the Fiat out of the way, and was in the process of pushing it off to wherever they kept the cars when I reached the front desk and got the clerk’s attention.

“Excuse me, signore,” I said. “Where can I find a store that sells phone batteries?”

“Of course, sir,” he said. “You’ll want to head to Home Away, on Via Chiara. Go south to Viale Spartaco to Piazza dell’Indipendenza, and turn left when you get to Via Chiara. Simple. Would you like a map?”

A map sounded good. “Yes, please.” He went in the back and retrieved a map, opened it up, and circled the hotel and the store. “Thank you, signore,” I said.

I dropped the glamour as I exited the hotel, and walked past the attendants pushing the car without being noticed. Divine weren’t seen by the Sleeping, unless they wanted to be.

It was a fifteen-minute walk from the hotel to the store. I kept my focus on my Sight, but I didn’t push it very far, trying to conserve energy. There were no Divine on the streets I was walking, or in the surrounding buildings, or on the nearby rooftops. The quiet only left me more time to think, and my mind kept flipping chaotically between Sarah, Charis, and the Beast. One to save, one

to match, and one to kill. I remembered Sarah's words again. 'Three brother, there are always three,' she had said. The patterns were everywhere. The balance was everywhere.

It was then, almost out of nowhere, that I thought of Rebecca. I remembered her first writhing in pain at the point of what I'd learned was a Canaan Blade, whatever that meant. I remembered her next in the janitorial closet of the Statue of Liberty, where she had first both frightened and fascinated me. It hadn't been an accident, I knew now. Ross had dumped me right into her hands, so she could look after and guide me to the destiny he had designed. Everything she had said, everything she had done had been false. Not a lie, exactly, because I knew the feelings she had developed for me had been as real as she could understand them to be. Then she brought me to the Beast so he could kill me and take back his power. Sacrifice was a part of love, but wasn't it supposed to be the other way around? Was a demon even capable of understanding that?

I was at Home Away before I knew it. It wasn't a surprise to me that it turned out to be a store specializing in helping foreigners get connected to their loved ones through electronic devices. The clerk approached as soon as I entered.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked. He was young, maybe the age I had been when I had died. He was tall and lanky, with a spread of curly brown hair and a stylish pair of red glasses.

I reached into my pocket and took out my phone. "I just need a battery for this," I said.

He looked at it and nodded. "The S3," he said. "That's a popular phone. We have replacement batteries behind the counter." He led me over, and dug around in a drawer behind him until he found it. "We do an exchange service here. Just give me your battery, and you can take this one. The price is one euro."

I unsnapped the back of the phone and took out the battery, handing it to him. He gave me the replacement and I slipped it in. I snapped the cover on and hit the power button, thankful when it began booting. Then I grabbed the attendant's credit card and gave it to the kid. He ran it through, and it was done.

"Thanks," I said, taking back the card and heading back out into the street. The phone was almost ready to go, and there was a restaurant with outdoor seating nearby. I made my way across the road, the traffic flowing smoothly around me, and claimed a spot at

the cafe. I leaned back in the chair and stuck my legs up on the table, ignoring the looks I was getting from the other patrons.

The phone rang four times before Obi picked it up.

"Where the hell have you been, man?" he shouted into the phone. "It's like World War 'D' over here."

I dropped my legs and stood up. "What do you mean?" I asked, finding the panic button in record time.

"I mean total Divine chaos," he said. "Demons and angels fighting together, hunting down any Divine they can find, and taking out whoever or whatever gets in their way. The angels are outnumbered, and without an archfiend, the demons are disorganized. We've been lucky, because most of it has been isolated to more private locations so far, but I think it's only going to get worse."

It was only going to get worse. The Beast's warning. He had started his destruction in New York, because that's where the factions were weakest, thanks to me. I was the one who had taken out the archfiend, dismembered the ruling vampire family, and caused the angel sanctuary to be decimated. I was the one who had created the balance in that war, and unwittingly designed a complete imbalance in the other. It was exactly what the Beast had said he needed me for, and I hadn't let him down.

I hadn't felt any of it. The balance hadn't moved, at least not enough to create that empty pit in my soul. If the angels were fighting on the side of the Beast, they would fall. Unless they were only fighting demons. The Beast had said he needed the balance to keep his enemies from growing too strong. It made sense that he would order them to be careful about who they went up against.

"Is Izak with you?" I asked, hopeful.

"Yeah, man. He's the only reason Thomas and I are still alive. Seriously, what the hell is going on?"

I let out a held breath. If Izak was with Obi, he was as safe as he could be. "It's a long story," I said. "The important part is that the Beast is out of his cage, and he's consolidating his power. The Divine on the rampage are his followers. They're going to be doing their best to wipe all Divine out of existence, and then enslave humanity."

There was a pause. "Sounds like just another day at the office," he said.

"Yeah, but don't worry. Charis and I have a plan."

He chuckled. “Don’t worry? You wouldn’t be saying that if you were here. Did you find Sarah?”

“I found Sarah.”

“You don’t sound that thrilled.”

“She was the one who set the Beast free. I’m trying to help her, but between you and me, I’m not sure if I can count on her.” It was a tough thought. One that I hadn’t wanted to confront, but was hard to avoid. “She told me she was having visions that she was going to kill Charis and me.”

Obi breathed heavily into the phone. “I don’t know what to say. Stay alert, I guess.”

“The Beast took some of my power. I can still focus, but I don’t have the mojo I used to. I have to trust her, even though it could cost everything, because we can’t do this without her.” She had already used her ability to Command to bail us out twice. We were going to live or die by Sarah’s mental state. That one was tough too. “Obi, do me a favor?” I asked.

“What do you need, Boss?” he replied.

“There’s a church near the Belmont, Our Blessed Lady Mary. The priest there, can you go and check on him? Make sure he’s safe?”

“Sure, man,” he said. “But why?”

“Just do it for me? I’ll owe you one.”

He laughed again. “You already owe me a hundred or something.”

“Yeah. Think of how awesome it’ll be when I pay you back.” I gave him a few seconds to stop laughing. “Can you turn the phone over to Thomas?”

“Yeah, one sec,” he replied. I hear the muffled sounds of the phone changing hands.

“Landon,” Thomas said. “It is good to hear that you are well.”

“For the moment,” I said. “I wanted to ask you; have you ever heard of the Canaan Blades?”

Silence. A breath. Another. “Why do you ask?” he said, nervous.

“I was visited by an angel named Callus. He said that the sword Malize gave to Charis was one of three Canaan Blades. He wanted it back, but we lost it trying to escape from the Beast.”

More silence. “The Beast is free?”

“Yes, and no. It’s complicated. Thomas, I need you to talk a little faster. We’re kind of rushed on time.”

The angel sucked in some air, and sighed it out. “Okay,” he said.

“Callus is an Inquisitor, a seraphim detective, if you will. His job is to track down lost relics and artifacts, and retrieve them to either assist in the war against Hell, or return them to Heaven so they can’t be misused. I saw Charis’ sword… if I had known it was one of the Blades, I wouldn’t have let you take it to the Beast. Who is this Malize? I’ve never heard that name, and I know the names of all of the elder seraph.”

“Charis called him the Forgotten. She doesn’t know why he’s called that, but obviously its because nobody remembers he ever existed. Anyway, it’s not important. What is important is how desperate the good guys were to get it back, and if it, or the other two Blades can help us against the Beast.”

“I don’t know if they can help you,” Thomas said. “All I know of them is that they were created during what were known on Earth as the Dark Ages. Three swords, gifted to three seraph, to be used against a collective of archfiends who were massing an army around the mortal fighting, sewing even more discord and furor into the region. The angels brought the swords to bear against enormous odds, and emerged victorious. The balance began to swing heavily towards the Lord.”

I had seen the sword do its work. It had burned so bright the archvampire Cho hadn’t stood a chance in its glare. “Something happened to keep it from tipping,” I said.

“Yes,” Thomas agreed. “The Swords of Gehenna. You can guess their purpose.”

The exact opposite of the Canaan Blades, for sure. Even without Charis and I, the two sides had managed to keep some kind of balance pretty well on their own. “So what happened?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think anyone does. The angels who were in charge of the Blades were killed, and they were lost. Which could have caused the downfall of Heaven, except the archfiends who held the Swords of Gehenna were killed as well.”

It was hard to believe, especially since all of this had happened before any diuscrucis had walked the Earth. Who else would have taken them from both sides? “So somebody took all of the weapons. Why?”

“A good question. What’s even more curious is that whoever took them, never used them. As you’ve found, their power is such that they’re very noticeable when activated.”

Somehow, Malize had gotten his hands on one. Even though he

couldn't leave the Cave, and they hadn't been created until a thousand years plus since Jesus had been buried. Even though he would have fallen if he had killed an archangel to get it. Was Charis wrong about Malize? And, where were the other swords?

"So, what do they do that makes them so special?" Besides only being capable of destroying pure demons. The Beast must not have known what the sword was either, or he wouldn't have let Sarah use it to try to end us. And he called himself a god.

"I don't know," Thomas said. "That history is not kept in the open. Still, it doesn't comfort me to know the Beast has one."

Even angels had their secrets. "Me neither," I replied. "But at least he can only kill demons with it." Demons like Rebecca. "Thanks Thomas. I've got to get going. Remind Obi to do what I asked, and tell Izak that Sarah is safe. We'll be back in New York in a day or two. Stay safe."

"I'll tell them. You stay safe as well, my friend," he said. "By the way, how did you get Callus off your back?"

The question was posed with a thread of anxiety. Thomas may have signed up to join my little club, but that didn't mean he was comfortable with the idea of dead angels in my wake. I wish I could have given him better news.

"The Beast killed him," I said. "I've got to go." I hung up, feeling just a little bit dirtier than I had before the call.

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I started walking back up towards the hotel, my mind churning through what Thomas had told me. Who would have had the power to kill angels and demons holding a set of the most powerful weapons ever made?

It would have been a vacation to be hunting down a more complete history of the things. I could almost see myself sitting on a beach somewhere with a laptop, cruising the internet for any tidbits of data I could dredge up, Charis in the lounge chair next to me. In my imagination, she was wearing a little red two-piece, her toned flesh glistening in the sun, her hair laying damp around her shoulders. She pulled her sunglasses down her nose and looked at me, her eyes inviting, and then rose out of the chair and sprinted for the water, pulling off the shreds of fabric as she went.

"*Landon .*"

The knock from Sarah shook me out of my daydream, shoving me back into reality and leaving me a little bit breathless. Where had that little fantasy even come from?

"*Sarah, are you okay?* " I asked, glad that she was still able to

keep an eye on me.

"*For now* ," she replied. "*I've been watching over Charis, standing by the window. I saw a messenger demon pass by a few minutes ago, and now it's back, sitting on the roof of the building across the street, staring at me.* "

That wasn't a good sign. Whether it was the Beast, or just the local demonic overlord, the messenger demon would keep an eye on the prey while a more powerful contingent moved in. There was no doubt they would be picking up Charis' signal, the only question was how they would be receiving it.

"*I'll be there right away* ," I said. I focused, pushing power to my legs, and started running. I could still tear up the pavement, but the noticeable reduction in output nagged at me with every stride.

"*We'll be waiting* ," Sarah said. "*I'm going to wake Charis.* "

I felt her presence vanish from my mind, and I tried to push harder to pick up the pace. It couldn't be more than a few minutes to the hotel.

I put all of my energy into the run, and turned all of my attention to the thrill of it. The pumping blood, the wind on my face, the feeling of my muscles thrumming beneath the skin. It was raw pleasure, a twist of freedom I hadn't experienced in some time, maybe even since I had been mortal. It was short-lived.

There was no warning. I was so focused on the visceral joy of the chase that I never Saw the were charge out of the alley, leap, and grab me, throwing me violently into a second alley directly across from his origin. He landed on his feet, while I tumbled and rolled along the pavement, scraping up my meager clothes and feeling the bite of stone in my skin. I cursed at the pain, and came to a stop.

"Diuscrucis," he said. "We were told you would be here."

My body began to knit itself, and I stumbled to my feet. My assailant was keeping his distance, blocking off the only way out of the alley. He had hit me in his demon form, but had since shifted back. He was tall and muscular, with a huge jaw and a bald head.

"Who told you?" I asked. I already knew the answer.

"A friend of yours," he said. "He told us where to find you and your friends. He said you weren't feeling quite yourself."

"He must have been exaggerating, if you think you can take me alone," I said, grabbing the dagger at my belt and holding it out, crouched into one of Josette's favorite guard positions.

“Look up, diuscrucis,” he replied. “I’m not alone.”

I looked up, and I could see the throng of weres standing above me, edging the buildings on either side of the alley. I hadn’t Seen them. I still couldn’t See them. They were far enough away to avoid detection, but close enough to leap without killing themselves.

“He offered to promote me if I captured you alive,” he said. “I would never have tried it, but he told me to test you out. We’ve been following you from the rooftops since you left your hotel. I was sure you would have known we were there.”

I should have known they were there. “You and your pack aren’t acting alone. Who’s commanding you?”

“Myzl is leading the attack. He’s probably meeting with your friends right about now.”

Myzl. I knew the name. A fiend without a home, he didn’t seek out the kind of power that most demons hungered for. His desires were much more physical. I could only imagine what the Beast had promised him, and I could only imagine how he would handle Charis and Sarah if given a chance.

I looked up at the weres surrounding me again. There were at least a dozen of them staring back, ready to pounce if I tried to run. Of course, I didn’t have a choice but to try something. If I let them take me, I was as good as dead anyway. It was all just a matter of timing.

I dropped the dagger and put up my hands. “Fine. You’ve got me,” I said. “You should know, Myzl is working for the Beast.”

“Who?” he asked.

“You don’t know who the Beast is?” I said.

“I know there’s an old legend about it,” he replied. “I’m not stupid enough to believe that it’s real, especially coming from you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. The angels hadn’t believed me, why would the demons? It had been such a long time, neither side could conceive of the fact that their oldest stories were true. “If the Beast wins, you’re going to die,” I said. “We’re all going to die.”

The bald were smiled. “There is no Beast,” he growled, turning his attention to the rooftops. “Come and get him.”

The rest of his pack leaped from the buildings, landing gracefully in the alley. Two of them grabbed my arms while the others loitered around them.

“Take him to the rift,” Baldie said.

They started to move me forward, and I let them. The other

weres formed up around me, leading me to where Baldie was standing at the end of the alley. It was a lost cause to try to get away from them while they had me boxed in. Once we got out into the streets, it was a different story.

"You're going to regret not believing me," I said. Baldie stood right in front of me, leading us out of the alley. The mortals had subconsciously fled the scene, something in their mind telling them to stay away from the area.

"I'm going to regret not gagging you," he replied with a snarling laugh. I heard a couple of throaty chuckles behind me. It was time to go.

I focused, pushing my will, demanding my body to become stronger, and then using the strength to stomp on the feet of the weres who were holding me. I felt their bones pulverize beneath my feet, their weight shifting as they recoiled in pain. The change in their balance was what I had been after, and I pulled them forward, throwing them into the weres in front of me. Four of the five fell together in a heap, leaving only Baldie between me and the open road.

"Going somewhere?" he asked, lashing out at me with hands elongated into claws. "Not if I can help it."

I took the blow on the cheek and let the force of the attack carry me to the side, away from the weres that had been behind me. I rolled onto the ground and hopped to my feet, ducking under a follow-up attack from him. The others were regaining their footing, shifting to their demon forms. I was running out of time. I wanted to go north, and north was clear. All I had to do was get the furry monkey off my back.

He tried to hit me again, and I sidestepped, twisting and planting my elbow in his jaw. I heard the crack of it breaking, and he crumbled to the pavement. At least my muscle memory had retained some of Josette's ninja moves. The coast was clear, and I propelled myself forward, legs pumping.

The weres gave chase. I could hear them growling, their sharp claws scraping the cement. I started to push harder, but I knew it would be a waste. Even pumping myself up, two legs were no match for four. Where the hell was Ulnyx when I needed him? In there somewhere, I knew, torn to pieces and licking his wounds. I reached out with my Sight, and ducked below a heavy tackle, sliding along the ground, then rising up and turning east. The weres

turned with me, chasing me along a narrow street. I could see people up ahead, our battle shifting locales too quickly for them to evacuate.

Cursing, I saw a fire escape up ahead, and I coiled my legs and jumped for it. It was fifteen feet up, and I hit the metal hard, feeling my ribs cracking on the impact. The weres didn't slow, and I turned and lashed out with my foot, catching one in the snout and sending him careening back to the ground. I pulled myself upwards, ascending towards the rooftop.

The fire escape shook when the weres started landing on it, led by Baldie. Even in his demon form, there was a patch of fur missing from the top of his head. I could have laughed, if I had any strength to spare. Instead, I stopped, twisting around on the metal structure and putting my hands below my body, focusing on the iron, willing it to rust and crumble, pushing the corrosion along its length to where it was bolted into the stone. Baldie was getting close. I could see his yellow eyes looking up at me. I could feel the heavy stench of his labored breathing.

I smiled and waved when the fire escape lost its grip on the building, and the whole group of them went down with it.

It was a temporary victory, I knew. They would heal from the wounds, and be looking for a way back up to where I was. My body began to feel sluggish, but I pushed ahead, climbing the fire escape ten stories up to the rooftop. I could see the way north to the San Gallo Hotel. I resumed the run.

I sent my focus outward, capturing the heat of the demon army in front of me, and the growing heat of the weres gaining behind and below me. I reached the edge of each building and leaped, willing myself to the other side, fighting against fatigue to reach my destination. I Saw the grunts coming, their wings carrying them from nearby buildings on an interception course. I didn't slow, catching the arm of one mid-air and throwing it into another, lashing out with feet and hands to send the lesser demons scattering.

I hit the next rooftop and tripped, sprawling forwards and getting right back up, ducking under a claw and grabbing it on the way by, pulling the grunt from the sky. Without a blade or Ulnyx's strength I couldn't kill them, but it was enough to get me through their lines. One more jump, and the shorter hotel was right in front of me. I could See Charis now, and Sarah. They were backed into

the corner of our room, a white hot beacon standing over them, flanked by a pair of fallen angels. It had to be Myzl.

Nobody was moving. Charis was in front of Sarah, and I knew she was trying to protect her. Why wasn't she Commanding the angels? I knew she had the power. Something must have happened. There was no time to stop and consider. There were vampires on the ground, and the weres had split up. The grunts still circled in the air, coming towards me more cautiously now. My feet were approaching the edge of the building, and I gathered myself for the jump.

Time seemed to slow as my feet left the ground, my body launched forward, angling towards the window of the corner room in the hotel. I pushed the air in front of me, shattering the glass before I hit it, collecting the shards and pulling them back out into the open atmosphere. Some of them dug into my body, but more of them flew by, implanting themselves into a pair of grunts who hadn't been cautious enough. I crashed into the room, the momentum carrying me forward into the drywall and through to the next room. I Saw Myzl and Charis both turn to look in my direction, right before I made my grand entrance by smashing through the wall and coming to a stop on my back behind the demon and his cronies.

I knew I should say something witty, but I was too tired and in too much pain. I groaned and tried to get to my feet, but was gripped by the angels within seconds. They pulled me to my feet, and I got my first look at Myzl.

"Hello, Landon," he said. He was handsome, middle-aged, with a neatly cut mane of salted red hair and a crisply groomed goatee. His smile was perfect and white, and his red eyes hypnotic. He was wearing a simple black suit with a black tie, and I could see the runes running up his wrists.

I looked at Charis. Her eyes were wide, and she was frozen like she was in shock. Sarah was on the ground behind her, head buried in her hands, whimpering.

"Do you surrender?" I asked. It was stupid, but it was all I had.

Myzl laughed. "Do you?" he replied.

I strained against the grip of the angels. One was male, the other was female. They both had short black hair and similar features. "What do you think?"

"I think I'll have to convince you, like I convinced them," he

said. He held his hand out, and then he was gone.

"Landon," Rebecca said. She was standing in front of me, blood staining the front of the dress she had been wearing in the Beast's prison. "You let me die. You could have saved me. How could you do that?"

I knew it wasn't Rebecca, didn't I? It seemed so real. My mind felt muddled by the vision, by the power. "I'm sorry," I said, the words falling out unbidden. My head caught fire, and I felt the guilt and fear begin working its way up my spine.

"Sorry?" she asked. "I would have done anything for you, if you had only asked. I would have stopped following the Beast for you. I would have been on your side forever. We could have been together. Friends, lovers, anything you wanted."

My thoughts lost cohesion, and I dropped to the ground. "I'm sorry," I repeated. I felt the wetness of my tears. "Please, forgive me." My hands were up, and I was on my knees, begging her.

"I can't," she said. "You let me die. You gave me to the Beast."

I was tired. So tired. I fell forward, still in supplication. Rebecca stood over me, and the blood from the wound in her heart dripped down into my hair. "I'm sorry," I whispered. The floor was spinning, and I knew I was going to lose consciousness.

"*Hey, meat.* " The voice resonated in my faltering mind, echoing into a vast emptiness.

"*Ulnyx* ?"

"*How did you like that bathing suit?* " he asked. "*Charis. Man, is she hot or what? Oh, and when she took it off? Wooo-Eeee! Too bad she killed that asshole vampire. I think I'm going to kill her.* "

I felt the Great Were flooding into my mind, his power eating into my soul. "*What are you doing?* " I asked, my voice barely more than a croak.

"*I've been waiting,* " he said. "*Waiting for you to be weak. Waiting for you to be spent. Waiting to take over. Your soul is mine, meat.* "

I felt the power growing, felt him pushing me out of my own body, my soul sinking behind his own. I tried to focus, to fight it, but he was right. I was too weak. I had lost too much to hold him back, and I didn't have Josette to help keep him at bay. "*Ulnyx, wait. You don't understand.* "

"*I understand enough,* " he growled back. "*Lylyx is dead because of you, and her killer because of that bitch of yours. I'm going to get my payback, and then I'm going to go have some fun. You've been driving*

too long, meat."

"*The Beast* ," I said. His power was overwhelming me, pushing me further and further down. I felt like a ghost in a machine. Was this how he had lived since I had absorbed him, observing and waiting for a chance to surface?

"*The Beast can suck it* ," he replied. "*Let him destroy the world, what do I care? I'll party while it burns, and I'll laugh when he comes around to destroy me. I'll laugh in that stupid bearded mug of his.* "

I wanted to say more, but he cut me off. I pushed my thoughts forward to speak, but a vice clamped down on me, creating an insane pressure in my head. "*Keep it shut, meat* ," he said. "*I've got work to do.* "

I felt my body moving. I saw it through my eyes. First, the floor. Then, the demon Myzl's feet. He was kneeling in front of me, his hand still out, trying to control me with his power. He didn't know I wasn't in charge anymore. He didn't know the new power he was dealing with. I felt my hand grow and change into a claw. My mouth emitted a harsh, guttural growl, and it lashed out, ripping the hand right off the archfiend.

He stumbled back, crying out in pain. Ulnyx lunged, grabbing the demon by the throat and twisting, snapping his head off his shoulders like it was nothing more than the top of a dandelion. He roared, turning towards the angels, catching their swords on enlarging, toughening skin, grabbing each by the head and smashing them together. They shattered like watermelons.

"God damn it feels good," he shouted in his deep, rocky voice.

The archfiend was dead, his hold on Charis broken. "Landon?" she asked, her voice tentative. Ulnyx turned to face her.

"Not quite," he said. "But if you want to leave a message before you die, I'll pass it on to him."

She gasped and whipped her sword up, too slow. Ulnyx caught her wrist and twisted, breaking it and making her drop the blade.

I tried to cry out, to ask the Were to stop. I tried to focus and force it. I tried to find Josette. It was like sitting in the front row of a movie theater, watching the nightmare unfold on the screen. I was powerless to stop him.

"I don't want to kill you too fast," Ulnyx said to her. "I didn't get to take my revenge on the vamp, so you'll have to do instead."

"Ulnyx, wait," Charis said. The Were had finished shifting, and he crouched, packed tightly into the small room.

“For what?” he asked. “Are you going to undead the vampire so I can have a turn? One thing. One freaking thing in my entire life that meant anything to me. One thing that filled the blackness of my soul. I’m a demon. I’m evil. Deal with it.” He reared back to lash her with his claws.

“No,” Sarah Commanded, ducking out from behind Charis. “Stop.”

I felt her power resonate through my hijacked soul. The Were was strong, and he fought against it. “You can’t stop me, little girl,” he said.

“I can,” she replied. “Go back to your hiding place, dog.”

The word infuriated him, but his fury cost him his concentration. The power shook inside of me, vibrating every molecule of my essence. I could feel him weakening below the Commands.

“No,” he said again. He tried to bring his arm forward, to slash Charis. He couldn’t.

“Give Landon his body back.”

The pressure was intense. My existence shook violently, and I felt my body shudder.

“No,” he said one last time, turning and leaping.

He crashed through the outer wall of the room and dropped to the ground below, ripping into the smaller weres on the ground. They scattered in front of him, and he bounded away, out into the city. I could feel my body working, my blood pumping, the raw power of the Were coursing through it. I didn’t know where he was going, or what I was going to do to stop him. He knew the score, and he didn’t care. What the hell was I going to do now?

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We raced through the city, headed north. I don't know if Ulnyx knew where he was taking us. I doubted that he cared. Away was sure to be good enough. Away from Sarah, the only one who could stop him from ripping Charis apart.

"Ulnyx!" I tried to shout to the Were, to get his attention, to slow his escape. I could feel his power surrounding mine, the strands of his energy wrapped tightly around my own, holding it the way I had held his. Ever since Charis had killed Cho, he had hidden, hoping for a time when I wouldn't be able to stop him from taking over. He hadn't been wrenched loose by the Beast like Charis had been. Instead, he had seemed so small to Sarah because that was his design. He couldn't have known the Beast would weaken me so much, could he? It had been a perfect storm that had brought him into power. How long might he have had to wait without it?

If he could hear me, he was ignoring me. He wasn't giving me a chance to ask him if he was a servant of the Beast, or to find out the whole of his game. We ran at a breakneck pace, out of the city limits and onto a one land country road, twisting westerly into the

hills. I wish I could have enjoyed the scenery more, because the landscape around us was beautiful. Instead, I had to figure out some way to get Ulnyx to stop acting out of the pain of his loss, and start listening to whatever type of reason I could pass on to him.

"*Where are we going?* " I asked him, focusing my energy and digging into his own. "*Damn it, Ulnyx! At least tell me that.* "

"*I'm going to find some nice country folk,* " he replied, finally answering me. I wished he hadn't. "*I want a farmer's daughter.* "

"*Ulnyx, don't,* " I said. "*Slow down, and let's talk about this.* "

His laughter boomed around me. "*You want to talk, meat?* " he asked. "*You never wanted to talk when I was the one in the sidecar. You never asked me what I wanted. Why the hell should I care what you want?* "

Why? I had no idea. I had nothing to offer. Nothing to give him in exchange for my freedom. He had my body, he was free to roam the world. Why would he ever give that back? If I were lucky, maybe one day Charis and Sarah could catch up to him, and she could talk him into relinquishing control.

"*I know you cared for her,* " I said. "*I know you wanted to kill Cho. I was there, Ulnyx. He was kicking your ass.* "

He stopped running, skidding to a halt and standing in the center of the roadway. "*You think I don't know that?* " he roared. "*She was my mate, Landon. I couldn't even avenge her death! For all of my strength, all of my power, and even with your help, I couldn't kill that piece of crap!* "

That's what was really eating at him. "*So killing Charis is going to change that somehow? He wasn't just an archvampire. He had drank Rebecca's blood, my blood from the Holy Grail. The only reason Charis was able to defeat him is because she was using a freaking vorpal blade .*"

He started trotting forward again, but I could feel some of the fire and anger burning away from him. "*It doesn't matter,* " he said. "*She's gone, and I'm horny.* "

"*I've seen your memories,* " I said. "I *know the truth. You've done a lot of messed up crap, and you've hurt a lot of people, but I know what it's all about.* "

"*I'm a demon, meat. Remember? Just because I've been stuck inside you, doesn't mean I've turned into a wuss like you.* "

I flashed through the memories. The violent, angry, vile memories. He had murdered, he had tortured, he had raped. He had

eaten the flesh of man while they were still alive, laughing as they screamed in pain and horror. He had ripped the teeth from a vampire one by one, feeding each back to their owner, forcing him to swallow them. He had done much worse than that. If my body was my own, I could have retched.

Yet, he also had the capacity to love. He had the ability to desire offspring, so badly that it had been this simple truth that had been his greatest undoing, driving him to so much of his violence. He was able to care about Rolix, enough that he felt such fury towards the Templar who had killed him. He was a demon, and his potential for destruction and lack of remorse over the agony of others was undeniable. So was his sense of loyalty, and of duty, and of pain and loss and love. He needed that spark of life, that connection to the Creator to survive, just like all of Lucifer's earthly creations did. It was that spark that made him more than just a machine of death and chaos.

"*You aren't all evil,* " I said. There was a time that I believed he was. That was when I had only seen the memories, but I'd since experienced them. The debilitating waves of history had brought me to a deeper understanding of both of my companions. "*You loved Lylyx.* "

I felt the wave of sadness crash through him. "*I did,* " he replied. "*I could never give her what she wanted, because I was too weak. She died to save me, because I was too weak. When a Divine dies, there is no afterlife. No Heaven. No Hell. No something more. She's gone… like, gone, gone. There's nothing else for me, meat. Nothing but the anger, and the hate, and the desire. It's all I have, and it's all I am.* "

There was nothing to say. How could I possibly respond to that? I felt the pain myself, a sharp stab in my soul, and Rebecca's face rounded into my memory. No something more. My inability to save her weighed on me. I knew it shouldn't, she had been an enemy, but there was something there I just couldn't shake. I shifted my thoughts to Rachel, and to Zeek. Where were they now? They had been mortal, their longevity provided by their allegiance. Did they go to Heaven, or Hell? Would I see them again?

Ulnyx continued trotting for another hour or so, until he came to a high stone wall. He raised our nose to the air and took in a deep breath. It smelled like tomato sauce. "*Do you think they have a daughter?* " he asked, gathering himself and leaping the barrier with ease.

"*You're really going to do this?* " I asked.

"*Why not?* "

I was going to tell him not to, because it was evil. I almost made myself laugh. Instead, I said nothing.

We could smell them as we moved in closer. The musty, musky, dirty smell of the man who had spent the day out in the fields we now stalked through, tending tomatoes and herbs, caring for cows and pigs and goats. The sweeter, softer smell of his wife, who had made him fresh pasta and bread, and smelled like the kitchen she spent her days in. The flowery, youthful, evanescent scent of their daughter, fresh and clean out of the shower, ready for their meal together. Ulnyx had found what he was looking for, and he was going to do it, unless I could figure out some way to stop him.

He shifted back to human form, and crept through the fields. He didn't bother trying to conceal our approach, because they couldn't have seen us anyway. We reached the house, and we made our way right up to the kitchen window and peered in.

The family was there, sitting down at a small wooden table, enjoying their fare. The parents were middle-aged, with wild, graying black hair, their faces creased in reaction to their lives. They talked and laughed, touching one another lovingly as each told a story, or they shared a moment from their past and relived it with their offspring. She was no more than fifteen, with long, black hair and a freshness that I could feel stirred the desire in the Were's dark soul. She was smiling and happy, wrapped up in the joy and love of her family.

"*She's just a kid* ," I said. "*She doesn't deserve this.* "

"*Shut up, meat,* " he replied. I felt his power clamp down on my own, inhibiting me from speaking to him.

Ulnyx circled back around to the front door of the small home, and then reached out and twisted the knob. The door groaned slightly as it swung open. They felt so safe, they didn't even bother to lock it.

"Did you hear the door?" I heard the wife say.

"Probably just the wind," her husband replied.

Ulnyx slipped into the house, into a small living room with an old couch and a rocking chair, a fireplace and a shelf filled with books. We walked directly across it towards the kitchen, a creepy grin spreading across our face, our heart gaining speed with the imminency of our conquest. I could feel our libido thrumming and

eager for the taste of young flesh.

“Is someone there?” the man asked, after we stepped on a creaky floorboard. It was that sound, that question, that propelled the Were into action.

He swept into the room, a figure out of their nightmares, reaching out and lifting the girl from her seat, holding her from behind. The girl’s mother screamed, and the father rose to his feet, his kitchen knife clutched like he could cut someone with it.

“Hello, child,” Ulnyx whispered into the girl’s ear. “Such a beautiful creature. I have something special for you.”

The girl shivered in his arms, tears rolling down her face. The smell of her urine overwhelmed the other kitchen scents.

“Let go of her,” her father demanded.

“Or what?” Ulnyx growled. “Are you going to butter me?”

The farmer’s arm shook as he stepped forward, the knife shaking wildly from side to side. Ulnyx let out a soft laugh, and his hand shot forward, grabbing the man’s wrist and twisting. I heard the crack, and the knife dropped to the ground.

“Let her go!” The girl’s mother hadn’t been stationary. She had grabbed a pan from somewhere, and it came screaming towards the back of our head. It hit us hard, and even managed to force Ulnyx to take a step forward to rebalance us. He growled and reached back, taking the woman by the neck.

“That wasn’t smart,” he said, pulling her towards him. He brought her right up to his face and took a deep breath. “I smell the sickly sweetness running down your leg. I was only interested in your child, but you may hold some entertainment value as well.”

“Wait, please!” The husband was coming towards us again, his hand hanging limp. “I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“I already have what I want,” Ulnyx snapped. “Now, be a good boy, and clear the table for me. As you can see, I have my hands full.”

The man hesitated until Ulnyx tightened his grip on his wife’s neck. “If you’re agreeable, I might leave them alive,” he said.

The man nodded and obeyed, using both hands to push the food from the table, despite the amount of pain it caused. Once it was clear, Ulnyx pulled the mother over to it, turning her towards him. “The end of the world is coming,” he said. “Is it wrong for me to want some simple pleasures before it does?”

I closed myself off from him then, the way he had done to me. I

retreated, pulling my soul in as tightly as I could, separating myself with every ounce of effort. I didn't want to witness what he was going to do. It would be enough that it was my face they would see.

As I retreated, I pushed one last time, sending one final message to the monster I was trapped with.

"I hate you," I said, letting go of my external senses, watching the world fade away even as the Were pushed the woman onto the table and tore away at her clothes. I couldn't cry here, but the pain was no less real, and no less intense.

Despite my best efforts, I could still hear the outside world as whispers in my disembodied consciousness. I could hear the crying of the girl, the pleading of the mother, and the heavy breathing of the Were. I could feel the racing heartbeat, the feral pleasure of conquest. A heartbeat passed, and then another, and then another. I waited for Ulnyx to act, to finish removing the woman's clothes, to ravish her in front of her family. I don't know why, but he had paused.

"Damn it," he cursed, tilting his head up and howling in rage. "What the hell did you do to me?" He looked at the woman. "Get up," he ordered. She rushed to comply.

He pulled the girl in front of him, looking her over. Her eyes were red with tears, and the demon just stared at her. Another heartbeat, and then another. He growled under his breath, and then turned and ran out the door, shifting as he cleared the house.

"*Landon, you son of a bitch* ," he said, his soul reaching for me. "*What the hell did you do?* "

I let myself respond to his call, climbing back up from the depths I had sunk to. "*I didn't do anything,* " I said.

"*Bull* ," he shouted. "Y*ou did something to me. Fruit ripe for plucking, and I couldn't do it.* "

We trampled through the fields, a full spring towards nothing in particular. We leaped over the wall and flew down the road, as though running faster would fix whatever Ulnyx thought was broken.

"*Impotent?"* I asked. Despite my predicament, I was finding enjoyment in his failure.

"*No* ," he said. "*I just couldn't do it. The crying, the pain, the fear. I used to relish in it. Looking at those pathetic mortals, all I felt was… was…* "

"*Pity?* " I asked.

He growled. “*Guilty* ,” he said. “*That I shouldn’t take advantage of them because they’re so weak. I almost… almost…* ”

“*Cried?* ”

“*Cared* ,” he said. He leaped over another wall, landing next to a large oak tree. He shifted, and sat down against it. “*You’ve made me weak.* ”

“*I disagree,* ” I said. “*It’s easy to take advantage of the weak. It takes strength to walk away.* ”

He was silent for a few minutes, in consideration of what I had said.

“*I don’t know what you did, but I hate it,* ” he said at last.

I laughed. “*I’m afraid there’s no cure.* ”

He was silent again. We turned and looked up at the sky, dotted with thousands of stars I could never have seen in Manhattan.

“*Ulnyx,* ” I said, after a few minutes had passed.

“*What do you want, meat?* ” he replied.

“*Give me back my body,* ” I said. “*Please* .”

He didn’t say anything.

“*You don’t really want the world to burn,* ” I said. “*There’s no place for you if it does, and like you said, there’s no something more. Lylyx didn’t sacrifice herself for that.* ”

Silence.

“*None of this would have happened if it weren’t for the Beast,* ” I continued. “*I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for him. I’d probably still be guarding old stuff at the Museum of Natural History, and you’d be out killing and not feeling bad about it. If you want to get revenge on somebody, let’s get revenge on him.* ”

He didn’t say anything, but I felt the shift in his power. It was subtle, but I focused and pushed forward, finding the resistance gone. My power sunk in and around his, re-establishing the connection. I turned my head, in control of it once more. Then I wiggled my fingers and toes. I could feel Ulnyx churning below me, and I reached out for his power, watching my hand elongate into the Were’s massive claws. Next, I focused on the strands tying my soul to Josette’s. They were still ragged, but I could see that they were healing. Being in the background must have sped the process.

“*Thank you,* ” I said to him.

“*I didn’t do it for you,* ” he replied. “*I did it because I can’t do eve rything myself, as much as I wish I could. Don’t think this makes us friends.* ”

“*I can’t do everything myself either,* ” I said.

He’d never admit it, but he’d just shown that despite himself, we were friends.

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I was only sitting under the tree for an hour before Charis and Sarah pulled up in the rear of a taxi. I don't know if Sarah could track me while I was subverted by Ulnyx, but I had been sure she would find me once he had submitted. Even so, they approached slowly, Charis holding Callus' sword ready, and Sarah staying a few feet behind her.

"You won't need that," I said. "If you didn't already know, I'm back to my old self again."

Charis turned the blade face down and planted it in the dirt. "That's good to hear. How did you overcome him?"

I shook my head. "I didn't," I said. "We had a little talk, and he realized there was a bigger fish we could fry."

"So he doesn't want to kill me anymore?" she asked.

"*I'm still thinking about it* ," Ulnyx said, his voice echoing across my mind.

"Not at the moment," I replied.

She walked over and dropped down on the ground next to me, sharing the tree. Sarah joined her on the other side. "I'm sorry,

brother," she said. "He was too strong for me."

"I know you tried." I turned my head to look at Charis. "I take it the party fell apart once Myzl lost his head?"

She smiled. "There were a couple of stragglers who didn't get it, but we took care of them. I have even better news." She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, they were a soft red.

"Good to see you again, metaphysically speaking." I said.

"She said she's glad to see you're still alive. She was worried about you."

"She was?"

It was faint, but a blush spread across her cheeks. "She knows you're important to me."

I felt my own face heating up. "Well, I guess we know what we have to do now."

"The taxi's waiting," Sarah said.

I leaned my head back against the tree, then reached out and put an arm around both of their shoulders, pulling them toward me. "Just give me a minute," I said, taking a deep breath. "I don't know if we'll have another chance to take a breather like this."

I closed my eyes, focusing on the weight of their heads pressed against me.

"*Touching* ," Ulnyx said.

"*Shut up* ," I replied. He responded with a laugh.

A few more minutes passed, and then I patted their arms. "Okay," I said. "It's time to go get the new cage."

We all got to our feet, and I followed Sarah through a gate not far from where Ulnyx had hopped the wall. The taxi was waiting outside, a green and black painted Volkswagen micro-van. It didn't have a driver.

"I persuaded him to give us the car," Sarah said.

"I can imagine," I replied. I went around to the passenger side, letting Charis take the wheel. Sarah climbed into the back.

"I hope it's not too late," Charis said. "We lost a lot of time chasing after you."

"I know," I said. "Ulnyx is a more willing participant in this fight now, so I think it will have been worth it."

"*You're damn right* ," the Were growled.

Charis hit the gas, accelerating forward, and then doing a quick three-pointer to get us headed back towards Florence. We zoomed along the narrow country roads with abandon, and I was shocked

by how far the Were had run.

We had gone about twenty miles when the verdant farmland began to convert to the dense habitation of the city, and within another fifteen minutes we passed by the San Gallo.

"Where is the rift, anyway?" I asked.

"The Pitti Palace," Charis replied. "Just across the river."

"I'm not familiar with it," I said.

"It was built in the fourteen hundreds," she explained. "It's been under the control of a bunch of European dignitaries and aristocracy, but now it's a museum. There's a room there, a room nobody goes in. That's why."

"Am I off base to assume that the palace was owned by an archfiend at some point?"

She glanced over at me and nodded. "Close. It was owned by a Turned, but he was really just the deed holder. The archfiend ran the place, until Myzl deposed him. He preferred to stay closer to the action on the other side of the river, but he still used the rift when he needed to travel."

Except now Myzl was gone. It was good riddance, especially since he had been a servant. Would another rise quickly to take his place, or would the Beast make his move here, the same as he was in New York?

We crossed the river, and approached the Pitti Palace. The street fed right up to the back of the structure, a massive three-story brick building with plenty of arched windows and a few large wooden doors at ground level. I didn't need my Sight to recognize the gargoyles perched on the roof of the third floor, though it did come in handy to spot the fiend hanging out on the inside. Were they waiting for us?

"What do you think?" I asked Charis, pointing up at the demons. She leaned forward over the wheel to get a better look. There were six of them, spread across the roof.

"We don't have time to be subtle," she said. "If they're going to alert someone, we can be long gone before they get here. If they're going to attack, you can go furry and knock them down."

Go furry… I liked that. "Sarah, are you okay back there?" I asked, turning and looking back at her. She had been quiet the entire drive, and even now she seemed a little distracted.

"Huh? Yes, I'm fine," she said.

Charis slowed the car to a stop right outside one of the pairs of

massive wooden doors. I looked up. We were too close to the wall to see the gargoyles, and they weren't registering in my senses either. That was a good sign.

"I've got the door," Charis said. A moment later, it started rattling, shaking against whatever locking mechanism was on the other side. There was a soft pop, and then the doors swung open.

We went through them, under the colonnades and out into the main courtyard. There was a door on the right that led to an art museum. Charis unlocked it, and I shorted the alarm system. How did the demons usually come in?

We skipped the art, and made our way through another locked door and up the large stairway to the second floor. I could still See the fiend, their signature motionless, sitting on a direct intercept course. We walked along the marble floors, our shoes clattering against the stone, our approach anything but silent. Every ten feet or so we passed by a large arched window, and I could look out and down onto the roadway where we had left the taxi. I checked on the fiend again. They had to be waiting for us.

"Who is it?" I asked Charis.

"The fiend? I don't know," she replied. "He isn't very powerful, whoever he is."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough."

We reached a very ordinary door. At least, it appeared ordinary, but I could make the sweeping curves of the demonic runes looping back from under the frame. The door was protected somehow. I focused, and tried to shove it open. It didn't budge.

"It's not the kind of lock you're used to," Charis said. Her eyes flared red, the frame of the door glowed for a second, and it swung open.

The room was lit by a single sconce of hellfire, flickering against the back wall. In the center was the rift, the circle of runes scratched right into the marble floor, giving off their own eerie glow. To the right of the rift was the fiend, a younger man in a denim jacket and blue jeans, thick wavy hair that fell to his shoulders, and a grin that was way too friendly. At least it wasn't the Beast.

"Diuscrucis," he said. "Hmm… What is the plural of diuscrucis anyway? Diuscrucises? Diuscrucii? A bit of a quandary, that." His voice was odd, childlike yet deep, with a strange reverberation that made it feel like it was echoing. I couldn't help but smile.

“And you are?” I asked.

“You can call me Max,” he said. “It’s not my given name, but it’s good enough. A name is a label that speaks no words. Some say names have power, I say the ones who say that are stupid. No matter, that. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“If names have no power, why not use your real one?” Sarah asked.

He chuckled. “Ahh, excellent question, young one. The answer is because these fat mounds of muscle we wag too easily cannot form the rich, elegant, beautiful enunciation of my true name.”

“You’re a fiend,” she replied. “A human. Your name is human.”

“Bah,” he spat. “The name I was given on my mortal birth was merely a placeholder. No matter, that. I have been waiting for you.”

“Clearly,” Charis said. “How did you know we would be here?”

“The Beast told me,” he said.

Charis drew her sword. Sarah backed up a step to give her space. I stayed completely still. “The Beast told you?” I asked. “So you’re a servant?”

“Yes,” he replied. “And, no. It’s complicated.”

“We’re kind of in a hurry,” I replied. “Either attack us, laugh at us, join us, or get out of the way.”

“Ah-ha!” he shouted. “I should do all of the above, but probably not in that order. I have one purpose here, and one only. The Beast believes I am his servant, but I am not. I’m a spy.”

“A spy for who?” I asked.

His teeth beamed in the light of the hellfire. “You’d never believe.” He stepped forward, and Charis lifted her sword. “Hold, my dear. Hold your fury.” He turned his hand over and slid back the sleeve of his jacket, showing his bare wrist. “There.”

Charis and I looked down at it. “There’s nothing there,” she said.

He laughed, and then held up a finger. It grew into a sharp claw, which he used to slice the base of his arm. I had seen a lot, but I still felt a little queasy as he grabbed the open wound and ripped it upward. Instead of blood, muscle, and bone, there was a second layer of skin beneath. Scarred into his wrist was the mark of the Templars.

“You?” Charis asked, her eyes wide.

“Indeed,” he replied. “For many, many years. You might have thought there were no demon Templars, but you thought wrong. I was secretly a Templar before I died, but it had always been

intended that I would become a spy. I refused a drink from the Grail, and even refused the brand. I did some nasty deeds that I'm only slightly proud of and was sent to the Pit. A few hundred years passed, and I earned my way back. Yadda, yadda, yadda, demon plus servant plus Templar equals spy. Of course, I can't just leave my brand hanging out where the others can see, now can I?"

"Your purpose?" I asked. The story was cool, but not very helpful.

"He's been broadcasting to his servants since you let him out. They know about the Box, and he's already sent one of his most powerful minions to retrieve it. If you were planning to walk through that rift intending to stop him, you might want to reconsider."

It was bad news, but I wasn't surprised. We knew he would be after the Box, and we had been way too slow getting to the rift. Still, the Box was guarded by the Templars. Would it be that easy for the servants to overcome them?

"What would you suggest?" Charis asked.

"The Beast has sent a contingent of his servants to Paris, France. He's spoken of enlisting the demon, Abaddon to his cause. It's rather humorous, because none of his get wants to go near that one. Someone will though, soon enough, even if the Beast has to possess him to do it."

"Damn it," I cursed. "Tell us something we don't know." We were losing, badly.

He snapped his fingers and spun around, a weird combination of Kid Rock and Michael Jackson. "Did you know the Beast is convinced that you have the power to catch him in the Box, and hold him for all of eternity? He's afraid of you."

"The Beast is afraid of me?" I asked. It was a tough story to buy into. "He didn't seem too worried about us the last time I saw him." The grin crept back into my thoughts, chilling me. Still, he must have believed we could catch him, or he wouldn't be trying to get the Box in the first place.

"No," he said. "He's not afraid of you." He pointed at Charis. "He's not afraid of you." He shifted his finger to Sarah. "He's not afraid of you. Well, he's more afraid of you, but I don't know why, because you're just a little emo girl with bad genetics." He waved his hand around us. "He's afraid of all of you, together. The Three Musketeers."

Or the three diuscrucis. I looked back at Sarah. Always three.

"Why?" I asked. "How do we catch him, and keep him?"

Max shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "He hasn't said."

"How do you know he's afraid?" Sarah asked.

"Because he's desperate to catch you, and kill you. Because he's desperate to get the Box. The Beast's full power is a challenge to God. You should be nothing more than ants to be stepped on to him, yet he is putting most of his energy into trapping you. Yes, be careful diuscrusises. He is working to trap you."

I looked at Charis. "What do you want to do?" I asked.

"Thailand," she said. "The Templars can hold out for a long time against any demon who isn't Abaddon. We have plenty of safeguards in place."

"I was hoping you would say that," I replied. "Can you light us up?"

Charis' eyes flared, and she nodded, going over to the rift and kneeling in front of it.

"Are you coming?" I asked Max.

He shook his head. "You aren't listening. He seeks to trap you." He motioned to the rift. "This is just one of his designs."

I grabbed his wrist and looked at the Templar brand. "I've learned not to trust anyone who hasn't earned it," I said. "If you're right, then you'll have proven yourself, but until then, I can't risk believing you."

He laughed and clapped me on the back with his free hand. "Not as dumb as you look? Very well, old chap. I'll see you on the other side." He pulled his hand away and started for the door, bowing to Sarah on the way by.

"And I thought things couldn't get any weirder," she said, watching him go.

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The runes around the rift began to flame, and Charis rose from her crouch. “I wasn’t sure it would still be connected,” she said.

“There’s no reason for it not to be, if it’s a trap,” I replied. “Even if it isn’t, the demons need a way back out too.”

Charis nodded. We had two blessed swords, and she gave one to Sarah. “There may be too many for you to Command,” she said, “and we might be too busy to protect you.”

“At least we know they won’t kill me,” she said.

“Don’t be too confident,” I said. “Cho wasn’t supposed to kill me either, and he nearly did.”

“Sorry, Landon,” Charis said, turning to me. “I don’t have a sword for you.”

I smiled and raised my hand, pulling in Ulnyx’s eagerly given power. The hand grew and elongated into a nasty set of claws. “I don’t need one.”

“So that’s it then,” Charis said. “Landon, if this goes bad…” She trailed off, her eyes downcast.

“It won’t,” I said.

“If it does.” She burst forward and put her lips to mine; a quick, desperate meeting of flesh that melted right through that mental barrier of attraction that I was trying to keep between us. If passion could be shared in a split-second, she had somehow managed it.

“Thanks,” I said, feeling my face turning crimson. “If that’s your idea of a pep talk, you’re doing great.”

She didn’t say another word, pressing her lips together as if to hold onto the feeling for one final moment before we crowded through the portal.

One step in, one step out. We exited on the rooftop of the hotel in Thailand where I recovered from Sarah’s attack, and where I had met the angel Malize. Coming through, the effect on my senses was staggering; a mixture of coolness and heat that nearly toppled me from the alien nature of it. I had expected demons to be crawling all over the place, but finding a number of angels gathered was a shock.

They were assembled on the roof, angels and devils, neither of them fighting the other. They stayed segregated though, the blue team on one side, the red team on the other, but both reacted as we came into view. Swords were drawn, claws and fangs bared. It was a small army of thirty or so, but there were no major demons, no archfiends, and not even any super-vampires.

Charis strode forward with confidence, holding her sword in front of her face, daring the enemy to attack.

“I don’t know what the trap is,” I said to Sarah as I started shifting, “but this *is* some kind of trap.” It had to be. The Beast wasn’t stupid enough to think a mixture of simple devils and angels would be enough to stop us. Even if we had lost some of our power, that wasn’t the only tool we had in our belts.

There was a moment of total silence then. A complete calm. The sun was shining overhead, reducing the effectiveness of the devils even further, but did it strengthen the angels? The light glinted off Charis’ sword, illuminating her face in an ethereal glow. I could feel Ulnyx’s bloodlust flooding into me, my thoughts turning more aggressive with each huffing breath. Sarah stayed behind me, sword raised. She had years of practice, she could handle these piss-ants.

The devils came first, rushing towards Charis in a mass of red-brown leathery muscle, fangs, and claws. As they reached her, the ground around them began to crumble, not decimated but enough to throw them off balance. She tore into them with the blessed

sword, spinning in a tight circle, the blade a deadly extension of her exquisitely executed form. She was a whirling dervish, a Tasmanian devil, and Edward Scissorhands all at once. I never had to move.

"Come on," I shouted at the angels, still standing on their side of the rooftop. "You're no children of God. You don't need to wait for us to make the first move. Come and fight."

The angels looked at one another. They didn't seem too keen on the idea of falling, even if they had chosen to serve the Beast.

"Pathetic," I spat. I could sense Ulnyx's glee at my rage. I had taken more of his power, let more of his soul leech through. I hadn't just gained his form.

One of the seraph stepped forward, a boy of no more than ten. His sword was huge, almost twice his height, but he held it with ease. "Why don't you go and get the Box," he said. His face dropped, and a grin spread across it. He was here.

"Why don't you send your little army of birds to get plucked?" I replied.

The Beast chuckled. "That would be a bit of a waste, don't you think?" he asked. "No, they'll wait right here, and you'll go down into the building to get Avriel's Box. I'll tell you right now that it's what I want you to do. That it's a trap, and you'll do it anyway. That's the problem with your kind. You just don't pay attention."

"Landon," Sarah said. "He's stalling. He wants to keep us up here, to buy more time for his archfiend to find the Box."

I let go of Ulnyx, reducing back to human form and turning to face her, and then glancing back at the angel being possessed by the Beast. Was she right? Or was he? How did he know we were here so fast? Unless he'd been waiting for us already, or unless Max was the trickster I had a feeling he'd be. What if Max was the Beast? Would I have been able to tell? What if Sarah was helping the Beast, and I didn't know it?

"Landon," she said, more insistently. "We're wasting time. I can See the archfiend, he's six floors down. There are others there, but they're dying."

"You see," the Beast said. "Listen to the girl. Walk right into my design, and do it willingly."

I looked over at Charis. She was still a dozen feet away, but her expression was pained. She wanted to go down. Sarah wanted to go down. The Beast wanted us to go down. Or was he lying? That power didn't extend to him. That his honesty was even questionable

made the decision easier. I would trust Sarah, for better or for worse.

"Let's go," I said to her. We started running for the stairs, the Beast standing behind us, laughing. The laughter grew louder the closer we got, joined by the rest of the assembled angels. It was a disconcerting sound, hearing them augment the Beast with the same flat cackle. Was he possessing them all? I didn't slow to consider it. I pushed open the door to the stairs with a thought, and we charged downward, with Charis in the lead.

The stairwell was empty, but there were scrapes and scratches along the steps and railing, the inadvertent damage caused by the passing of a large force of demons. We dropped the first flight to the penthouse where I had recovered from my wounds. There was a pile of ash outside of the doorway, but the door had been torn aside and discarded, and the runes that had been protecting it had been scraped away by something powerful enough to withstand them. The archfiend.

"Where did you put the Box?" I asked Charis.

We ignored the penthouse, continuing down six floors to where Sarah could See the archfiend. I could feel the heat of the demon masses in my own senses, including one who was more powerful than the rest. It must have been him, but I wasn't sure. There was something not right about that one, like a picture that was hanging just slightly crooked.

"I gave it to Liam. He was second-in-command after Ezekiel. He should have put it in the safe room." She didn't turn back to speak, shouting over her shoulder.

"Which is down six floors?"

"Yes," she replied. "It's hidden behind a glamoured wall, and most demons won't be able to see it."

"What about an archfiend?"

"They shouldn't be, but we've never had a chance to test it. Nobody was supposed to know we were based here."

I saw her head shift slightly toward Sarah. It wasn't even an inch, but I knew what she was saying. I had been here, and Sarah had known I was here. She must have told Rebecca, who told the Beast, and now here we were. It sucked, but there was nothing we could do about it. Even though it had only happened a dozen hours or so ago, it had to be ancient history.

We reached the sixth floor down. The door had been decimated,

burnt to nearly nothing by hellfire. Beyond it was a hallway, and there were signs of the passing battle everywhere. The walls were scored with sword marks, shotgun shot, and bullet holes. There were four dead Templars down near where a pair of twin doors used to rest, their heads lying distant from their bodies. The mortals among them didn't get the dignity of reducing to ash on their demise.

I watched Charis for a sign of emotion as we passed them, but she held it together, showing nothing. If I had been able to see her eyes, I was sure I would have found the smoldering rage, the gripping sadness, the eagerness for her revenge. I could See the demons in front of us, beyond the twin doors, beyond the doors that followed after that. I could hear fighting in the distance; the sound of claw against steel and the popping of gunfire.

"They've breached the safe room," Charis said. "The Box is in a secondary safe bolted into steel and runed against Divine. Somebody has to still be alive in there, protecting it."

"Why are they protecting the room, instead of retreating?" I asked. "They couldn't know the Beast would come after the Box."

"Do you think the Box is the only artifact we've recovered?" she replied. "Protocol is to protect the safe room at all costs."

What other artifacts might the Templars have stashed, that the Beast would love to get his mitts on? I didn't like the thought.

Beyond the twin doors was a large living area, with a spread of couches, a pool table, a couple of televisions, a card table, foosball and pinball. Most of it had been shattered and shredded, broken to pieces and scattered along with eight more Templars who hadn't been able to withstand the assault. Two had been burned to bones by hellfire, the others shredded by the demon horde. There was a fair share of demon dust here too, and it was clear they had put up a good fight. They had skill, but they didn't have numbers.

We rushed through the room, to a doorframe that had been twisted and burned almost beyond recognition. It was a misshapen portal, collapsing on itself and at the same time expanding, the weight of the building around it threatening to overthrow it at any moment. There had been a steel door attached to it once, and it had been coated in a thick layer of Templar scripture. That door was laying crushed on top of the remains of the pool table. Through the opening, I could see the backs of the demon forces, a group of harpies hissing while they waited for their turn at the front lines.

The sound of a shotgun firing overtook the hissing, followed by a howl and the body of a hellhound tumbling through the masses to land at our feet. That din was stepped on by the screaming gurgle of another Templar meeting their end.

"Hey," Charis shouted as we came up behind them. The back row turned in time to catch her blessed sword through their cheeks, and I could See the tide of the enemy turn as they realized they were being attacked from the rear. Within moments they were coming at us, reversing direction to take on the new threat. I could sense the archfiend there, held out of sight behind the army, near the front of the line. How could they be in front, yet there were Templars still fighting?

The harpies turned towards us. The three that had been sliced by Charis' blade began to smoke and collapsed, leaving the others to step over them. She used the obstacle to her advantage, kicking one of the bodies towards the rushing demons, tripping them up and stabbing them as they stumbled. I heard another gunshot, and then a cry.

"Hurry," the voice said from the far end of the room.

"We need to get up there," I said.

"Working on it," Charis replied over her shoulder, ducking under a claw and punching the attacker in the face. The demon flew back, knocking into a devil behind it.

"You're too slow," I said.

I took hold of Ulnyx's power, not shifting completely, but allowing it to flow through to my hands, transforming them. I focused, gathering my strength and springing forward over Charis' head, coming down towards a group of devils. I let the claws lead the way, clearing a path in front of me, hitting the ground and leaping into the air again before they could recover.

The safe room was big, much bigger than I had expected it to be. It had a low ceiling, but it was at least thirty feet wide and equally deep. The walls were made of steel, and there were small alcoves lining it where racks of weapons had once resided. I could see the mounts for daggers and swords, the racks for shotguns and handguns and magazines filled with silver bullets. There were other alcoves too, some holding bottles of holy water, others cans of food. It was everything a Templar would need to be sieged in for a few weeks at least, but it wasn't designed to be overrun.

It took four such leaps to get to the head of the class. I finally

landed next to a scrawny, red-headed man in combat fatigues, holding a shotgun cradled in his arms, a magazine of shells snaking out of it. I had never seen a shotgun rigged like that before, but it allowed him to keep peppering the demons with holy water, preventing them from getting too close. Dead Templars lay on either side of him, their flesh turned black from the demons' poison. Behind him was a large painting of Joan of Arc. She had been a Templar too? I could only assume the secondary safe was sitting behind Saint Joan.

There was no time for pleasantries. I nodded to the ginger and turned around, looking for the archfiend. In my Sight, he was right in front of me, no more than ten feet away, a dark red mass of heat. To my eyes, there was nothing but harpies, hellhounds, and devils; a standard army, and outside of sheer volume a pretty pathetic one at that. There was no way this group had done the damage I had seen on the way in. The Beast had told us we were walking into a trap. I knew it was here, and yet I still couldn't find it.

"The archfiend?" I asked, hearing the blast of the shotgun and watching the front line of demons stumble back.

"He's right here," the redhead replied. I heard the gun clang onto the steel floor.

I didn't even have a chance to turn before the dagger was across my throat and he had me wrapped in a tight hold. He had grown, his voice had changed, and my Sight flared with the heat of him. He was powerful, so much more powerful than the fake signature he had somehow cast out into the mess of lesser demons. Worse, he was familiar.

I wasn't the only one who knew him. As soon as he was revealed I could feel it, like a change in air pressure that filled the entire room. All of the energy was stolen from it at once, and a mental coldness swept in; a raw, harsh void that caused the entirety of the Beast's army to fall, clutching at their heads to rid themselves of the emotion.

Standing in the back, her head jutted down and her arms at her sides was Sarah. Her empty eyes were drawn tight, and I could almost see the fury through the black shadows.

"Hello, my dear," Gervais said. "Did you miss your papa?"

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Sarah didn't respond right away. She just stood there, her body language substituting for the fire that would have been in her eyes.

"Let him go," she whispered, a Command that drove the demons kneeling between them to try to duck their heads even lower.

I could feel the archfiend suck in some air, as if trying to capture the Command. "I'm sorry," he said. "Could you repeat that? I thought you tried to make me let Landon here go, but I'm not sure."

"Let him go," she repeated, a violently snapped growl.

Gervais' laughter was nauseating. "Your Commands won't work on me, daughter," he said. "Your toadie, Izak took care of that when he branded me and left me to be destroyed."

I didn't know what he meant, but I didn't like the sound of it. I squirmed against his grip, and he dug the dagger into my neck, deep enough to show me he could remove my head before I could escape him. The Beast had set the trap, and we had walked right into it, just as he had said we would. What choice did we have?

"If I kill him, you lose," Gervais said. "Not that you stand much of a chance to begin with."

“Then why not just do it?” Charis asked. “Cut off his head and end the game right now.”

Gervais smiled. “Oh, I’d love to, after what he did to me.” The knife point dug in a little deeper. “But there’s something we need that is much more important than this one.”

I looked at Sarah. Her body was trembling in anger at her inability to help me. She was the reason the Beast had brought us here. She was the prize. He had already gotten what he needed from Charis and me, but he had to kill Sarah, to take all of her Divine infused, mortal blood in order to gain his full power. He didn’t even care about the Box; it was useless to us without her anyway.

If I could speak, I would have told Charis to get Sarah out of here, to run as fast as she could. There was no value to my existence if the Beast took Sarah; it would be a short existence after all. I looked at her and tried to express it in my gaze, and she looked back at me and it seemed as though she understood, but I could sense the reluctance to just give me away.

“Well, my dear?” Gervais asked. “Will you surrender to me, to save your friend? You never know, maybe he’ll even find some way to save you. He’s certainly proven himself to be quite resourceful.”

Sarah’s face grew wet with tears, her fists clenched, and I could almost feel the heat of her anger pouring from her body. She dropped her eyes to the ground, and then let it all go. “Yes,” she whispered.

I had to do something. I tried to make eye contact with Charis, to beg her to take Sarah away, right now. She wouldn’t look at me. She knew what she was supposed to do, and she wouldn’t do it. Why? I felt my anger building, and I knew I had to do something.

“Just step over here then,” Gervais said. “A simple trade. Landon for you, and then we will leave together, through the rift and then back to his prison.”

Sarah’s head nodded almost imperceptibly. This couldn’t happen. I couldn’t let it. If I was the bargaining chip, I only had value if I was alive.

I closed my eyes and focused, willing strength into my body. I knew Gervais would sense it, and I could feel his own power growing. He was expecting me to try to escape and throw his arm off. He didn’t plan on me pulling forward to dig the dagger deeper into my neck, to try to sever my own head.

“No,” he shouted as the blade bit into me. He couldn’t fight back against my pull in time. The only thing he could do was let go, so he did.

I immediately began to fall. The weapon had gone deep, piercing my esophagus and nearly reaching my spine, leaving me only centimeters from reaching my goal. The blood poured from my neck, and I couldn’t help but be reminded of Rebecca. She had done nearly the same thing to me, and now I had done it to myself. Was that balance?

Things seemed to slow down for me then. Gervais turned, reaching for the blade, to get hold of it before I could make another attempt at suicide. In the corner of my eye I saw Charis, her arm drawing back and then shooting forward, loosing her blessed sword towards the archfiend like a spear. At the same time, a glimpse of Sarah, running towards us, her fingernails impossibly stretched into daggers of their own.

It felt like ages, but it happened in less than a second. Gervais got a hold of the hilt of the weapon, and I felt the slick coldness of it being pulled from my neck. Charis’ sword slammed into the archfiend, biting deep into him, entering his chest and piercing right through, forcing him back. Sarah leaped towards him, her hands raised high, her face as feral as any I had ever seen, and yet so familiar to me.

My body didn’t reach the floor, smacking against the wall behind me. The dagger gone, it was already healing, and I managed to catch myself before I tumbled over completely. Gervais was run through by the sword, but it didn’t seem to matter. He ignored the wound, catching Sarah as she flew towards him, spinning her around and pinning her against the painting, the weapon against her throat. There was stillness for a heartbeat, and then another. I watched the archfiend, waiting for his body to hiss and steam, waiting for even a trace of blood to bloom from the hole in his body. Neither happened.

“Stay still,” Gervais said, holding Sarah. She struggled below his grip, so he whipped the butt of the weapon around, knocking it against her temple. He caught her unconscious form before she could collapse.

“You can’t kill her,” Charis said, approaching cautiously.

He turned, glancing at me, and then looking at her. He hefted Sarah over his shoulder. The sword was still lodged in his gut, but

he didn't seem to notice, or care. "No," he said. "But you should be more worried about yourself."

A growl reminded us that we weren't the only ones in the room. With Sarah out of action, the demons had recovered, and now they launched themselves towards us.

"Farewell, Mon Ami," Gervais said, laughing. "Enjoy playing with your box."

Charis tried to grab him, but was intercepted by a hellhound. She stepped out of its lunge and punched it hard, knocking it to the ground. A devil took its place, and she ducked away from its claws and used her cursed dagger to remove its head. "He's getting away," she grunted.

My neck almost healed, I dove forward and took the shotgun up in my hands, squeezing the trigger. I had never fired a gun before, and the kick threw my aim, but the demons were so close it didn't matter. The front line fell back, sprayed with holy water. The monsters were parting around their master, and he had almost reached the front of the room.

I pulled the trigger again, and watched more demons scatter. Charis took up position next to me, slicing at any of the demons who came too close. Wasn't this how the Templars at our feet had died?

"This is bull," I said, getting to my feet. I took the shotgun and threw it out, into the air over the demons, focusing and guiding it so it didn't hit the ceiling. The chain of shells trailed behind it, unspooling from the box they were piled in, extending like a ribbon.

I didn't need to tell Charis what to do. A moment later all of the shells burst, the holy water pellets raining down on the demons, diving into their skin. The mass cried out in pain, and I grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the exit.

"Wait," she said. "We need the Box."

"Not a good time," I replied. She stopped letting me lead her, and pulled back the other way.

"It doesn't matter if we get her back, if we don't have the Box. You go ahead, I'll catch up."

It was a lousy time for an argument. The demons would shake off the effects of the water any second. "Charis," I started to say.

"I can get back through this rabble," she insisted. "Go."

I didn't want to leave her. She hadn't left me. She took away my choice, grabbing me and throwing me towards the door with

focused strength. I crashed through the demons, landing ten feet away.

"Go," she shouted.

I kicked and punched my way out of the scrum, reaching the exit. Gervais had dropped Callus' sword there, but he and Sarah were already gone. I picked it up and threw it back into the room, guiding it until it thunked into the wall next to the painting, and then turned and raced after them.

I could still See the archfiend, already on the stairs and climbing fast. There was no way I was going to catch them without a better route.

"*Try the windows* ," Ulnyx said, his voice permeating my desperation and finding its way into my mind.

The windows? I wasn't sure what he was getting at, but I let his voice lead me. I diverted to the far side of the room, where a wall of floor to ceiling glass awaited.

"*Let me drive* ," he said. "*You know I won't keep you.* "

He had already proven that. I gave my body up to him, feeling it shift, growing into the demonic monster that was the Great Were. We didn't even slow as we changed, and Ulnyx bunched us and lunged forward, leading with his claws. They cut deep into the thick glass, breaking the crystalline bonds and compromising the entire surface. Our body went next, and we crashed through, out into the air.

"*Push us back* ," he yelled.

I was so impressed with the feeling of running through the window I hadn't been paying attention. I focused, bringing a gust of air to shove us back against the building. We had lost a couple of stories, but Ulnyx made it up in a hurry, scrambling up the outer frame like Spiderman.

We raced up the side of the tower, but I could See Gervais was nearly to the rift. It was going to be way too close. I focused, giving us an extra boost from behind, and we reached the summit with one final shove that sent us out over the rooftop, a massive pounce that brought us directly in line with the fleeing archfiend. He Saw us coming. I knew he would, but it was enough to divert him from the rift. He turned and raised his hand, and all of the air around us vanished, leaving us choking. He ducked as we fell, tracking us with his hand, keeping us in the vacuum.

Ulnyx hit the ground and spun, ready for another go. "The

angels," I said. We weren't the only ones on the roof. They charged towards us, all except the Beast, who watched with an intense gaze. I could swear I saw the hint of fear in those eyes, but I didn't have enough time to tell.

"It was a fine effort, Landon," Gervais shouted. He dropped his hand so he could resume his journey towards the rift, giving us back our air. Not that it mattered, we had our hands full.

Unlike the demons we had found in the safe room, these angels weren't some pity party meant to distract. They came on in an organized way, three at a time, encircling us. I knew this was standard procedure for taking on a Great Were, and I knew by their numbers if I didn't come up with something else they would win. I could only hope to hold out long enough for Charis to reach me. Giving her the sword had eased my concerns that she wouldn't make it.

I kept my Sight focused on Gervais while Ulnyx faced off against the angels. He would be gone within seconds, and I didn't see any way of stopping him. "No," I shouted, taking back control of my body from Ulnyx, roaring with anger and lashing out at the nearest seraph. My foot caught him in the chin, sending him flying backward thirty feet or more. It didn't matter, I couldn't reach Gervais.

That was when it happened. Call it luck, call it destiny, call it the hand of God. Call it whatever you want. Gervais was no more than six feet from the rift, when it suddenly burst into flames. Not the typical soft burning hellfire on the runes that made up the circle, but a literal gout of heat and fire that filled the entire circumference and made it appear as though someone had unplugged a tunnel that led directly to the heart of the Pit itself. The hellfire launched up into the air one hundred feet or more, causing the archfiend to begin stumbling backward, the angels to cry out in panic and begin beating their wings in an effort to escape, and that hint of fear on the Beast to grow into a full-blown worry.

A human figure stepped out of the flames.

Izak.

Gervais tried to shift Sarah so she would be between him and the demon, but he came too fast, somehow managing to slam his fist into Gervais' face and at the same time catch Sarah before the archfiend could drop her. He laid her tenderly at his feet, and then

looked up at his enemy.

"He isn't supposed to be here," I heard the Beast hiss.

I started running, not for Gervais or the Beast but for Sarah. I know Izak knew I was coming, and he stepped gingerly over her to put himself between her and her father.

"That might have hurt," Gervais said, recovering from the blow and straightening up. His nose was shattered on his face, but again there was no blood. "If I could feel pain."

He raised his hand, and I heard a groan from behind us. I turned to see that the now charred and somewhat melted radio tower the rift was located beneath had lost its base, corroded in an instant by the demon. It started teetering and then fell towards us, threatening to crush us all beneath it.

"What are you doing?" the Beast cried. "I need her alive!"

I needed us alive too. I focused, pushing my will against the tower, demanding it to stay up, or to fall any direction that wasn't this one. I felt the energy flowing, felt the strain of the demand as the universe countered my desires with its laws and rules and math. Still, I pushed. It wasn't enough.

I picked Sarah up, still focused, still trying. Her eyes opened the tiniest bit, but she was groggy.

"Izak," she whispered.

"He's here," I said. I looked at the tower. There was no way I could outrun it, no way I could stop it.

"He came," she said with a small smile. "He heard me."

I didn't have time to ask her what she had done. The tower was getting closer, and I pushed back, as hard as I could, feeling the strength draining from me. I could have stopped it before the Beast had taken some of my blood.

Charis couldn't have picked a better time to get to the roof. She appeared out of the stairwell, her body covered in demon blood, her hair a mess. She saw the falling tower, she saw us under it, and she added her power to mine, pushing against it and forcing it away. Combined, we took control, moving it off the side of the building and letting it tumble to the ground below.

Izak hadn't even noticed the tower. He charged on Gervais, his hands lighting up in hellfire, his punches rocketing in at the archfiend. Gervais took the hits, letting them throw him backward and burn him, getting back to his feet and laughing it off, taking the hits again. It only enraged the demon more, and he came on

stronger. Gervais retreated away from him, reaching the edge of the rooftop. When he did, he gave Izak one last look, and jumped off the side. I don't care what he had done to not bleed or feel pain, nothing could survive that fall.

With Sarah safe and Gervais dealt with, I lowered her back to the ground and turned towards the Beast. He had been watching the fight, but now he noticed me coming.

"Do you surrender?" I asked as I approached.

I was sure he had the power to will someone to cease to be just by looking at them, when he had control of his full power. At least, that was how it seemed by the look he gave me.

"You think you've won?" he asked. "Just because you got lucky here? You think this trap, this Box, is the only play I have? You still don't get it, do you, kid? You still just don't understand what you're dealing with here. Enjoy your little victory. Go pop some Crystal, get wasted, and screw your women. Do it first, because I'll be doing it last. In the meantime, I'll give you a little better-working sample on being a god. Keep your eyes open, kid. You might learn something."

He smiled again. That damn smile. A second later Callus' sword shaved the angel's head cleanly off his body, but I knew the Beast had already abandoned it.

"You have the Box?" I asked.

Charis nodded and patted a new pocket that had sprouted from her pants. "Right here," she said.

I went over to where Sarah was sitting. Izak had reached her first, and he had his arms around her, holding her so tightly it seemed she would suffocate.

"Izak," I said. "I've never been happier to see you."

The demon raised his hand in greeting without breaking the embrace.

"I don't want to rush the moment here, but we need to get moving. The Beast is pissed."

As if to back up my claim, I felt the ground below us shift, and heard a deep rumble.

"What the heck is that?" Charis asked.

I ran to the side of the building and looked down. It had to be a hundred stories at least, but I could see the dust forming around the base of the building. I could See Gervais standing there, his hands out, causing it.

“He’s bringing down the whole building,” I said in shock. The rumbling started to get louder, followed by the sound of the superstructure bending and cracking. “We really need to get out of here.”

I turned and raced back towards Izak and Sarah. “Izak, we need to go, now,” I shouted. “This building is coming down.”

He scooped Sarah up like she was a little girl, and we ran for the rift. Everything began shaking around us, the ground lilting and swaying like we were on a boat.

“Light it up,” I said, reaching out and taking Sarah from him. He crouched down and began scratching into the ground with his fingernail, leaving the runes that would change the rift’s destination. He poured his power into it then, and the runes flared up.

I heard a snap, and saw the rooftop behind us begin to disappear as the building collapsed from the south. Within seconds it would be gone, toppled onto who knows how many human souls, destroying who knows how many lives of those stuck inside of it. I could only hope the massive influx of Divine had driven most of the people from the area.

“Go,” I shouted. I handed Sarah back to Izak as he stepped through, and then grabbed Charis. My left foot made it through fine, but my right began to slip as the matter beneath it started rushing away. What would happen if I was caught in between and the rift was destroyed? I pulled hard on Charis, using the force of her momentum smashing into me to get us both all the way through before we lost the world around us.

I didn’t have a chance to get my bearings as we came through. I stumbled, the kinetic energy driving me off balance, knocking me onto my back with Charis on top of me. Our eyes met.

My first thought had something to do with timing. I discarded that one, and ditched the rest too. I leaned up and found her lips with my own, thanking her for not leaving me, thanking her for saving my life, and thanking her for staying alive. She didn’t hesitate to respond in kind, and while it was a short moment, it was one I would never forget.

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“There’s a smart-ass quip in here, somewhere. I just know it.”

Obi’s voice ripped me out of the moment I was having with Charis. She gave me a small smile and pulled away, rolling off and getting to her feet. Obi was standing over me, his face shining with the hugeness of his grin. He reached out and helped me to my feet.

“It’s good to see you again, man,” he said, clapping me on the back.

“You too,” I replied. “Sarah.”

I whipped around and sought her out. Izak had laid her on the floor, cradling her head on his lap. Her eyes were closed, and she was muttering under her breath. The demon stroked her hair, and looked up at me, pleading for me to do something.

“What’s wrong with her?” Thomas joined Obi at my side.

“I don’t know,” I said, going over to her and kneeling down.

“I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him. I’ll kill them all.” She repeated it like a mantra, her head steady but her arms and legs spasming.

“Sarah,” I said, trying to get her attention. She didn’t respond. “Sarah.” Nothing.

“His world? His world? No. Mine. My world.” Her voice was jagged, her words crackling like flames. I said I didn’t know the cause, but I *did* know. Her alter ego; the other half. The Beast had brought it out the first time by putting her in front of Gervais. He had used the archfiend to break her again, to summon that other Sarah that wanted the chaos of a destroyed world. He had done it with intent, to ensure that even if we had defeated his trap and rescued her, his loss wouldn’t be total. Maybe it wouldn’t even be a loss at all?

I looked around the room we had landed in. Stone walls with a layer of moss coating them near the top. Thick, moist air. A single wooden door across from us, with a crucifix hanging above it. There were some shelves on the opposite wall, boxes of old pamphlets, a neatly folded stack of black and white robes.

“We’re in the basement of a church?” I asked, looking at Izak. “You put a demon rift in the basement of a church?”

Izak glanced up, his eyes telling me my question was the last thing he cared about right now. It was the first thing I cared about. I didn’t even think it was possible.

“You told us to keep an eye on Father Tom,” Thomas explained. “So we headed straight over. He knew what I was, or at least what I used to be. We started talking. ‘Strange days, indeed,’ he said, ‘when the likes of you are falling to help the likes of him.’” Thomas did his best to mimic the Irish accent, failing pretty badly. “Anyway, he knew about St. Patrick’s… about what had happened to the people there. I told him it was going to get worse, much worse, if he didn’t help us help you, and that you had asked us to protect him. He wasn’t happy about it, but he agreed to let us stay, and he let Izak come in as long as he kept to the basement. He’s going to be really pissed about the rift.”

I could hear him shouting at me in Gaelic already. “Izak,” I said. “You need to destroy the rift. No traces, or we might lose the Father’s help, and we need it right now more than anything.” I reached down and put my arms under Sarah. “I’ll take care of her,” I told him. He looked worried, but he nodded.

“You guys wait here,” I said. “We’ll be back soon.”

I picked her up, and carried her through the door to a narrow set of cement steps. I carried her carefully, whispering to her. “Just hang in there, Sarah,” I said, wishing I had Josette with me to help. “It’ll be okay.”

“Kill them, kill them all. It’s mine,” she whimpered in response.

The top of the stairs fed out into a short hallway. I recognized the door to the Father’s office right away, and brought Sarah towards it.

“You’re back, eh?”

He was coming around the corner as I reached the office, as though he had known exactly when we would arrive. Not even Touched, but somehow he had an extrasensory perception of the Divine.

“Father,” I said, bowing my head with respect. Our first meeting hadn’t gone that well, and I had nearly choked the priest to death. I had gone out of my way to be reverent since then. It didn’t matter whether or not I agreed with everything he did, he had earned it. I was just thankful I had learned to understand his brogue more clearly since then.

He saw Sarah spasming in my arms, and his eyes widened. “You brought her here?” he asked, his voice rising.

“Father, wait,” I said.

“This is why you sent your boy-o’s to protect me?”

I nodded. “She needs your help.”

He shook his head. “She needs more than I can help her with. Do you know what could happen to me?”

“You aren’t Divine,” I replied. “As long as you ask Him to forgive you before you die, nothing will happen.”

He huffed and sighed, and then came over and opened the door to his office. “Put her on the couch,” he said.

When I had gone to Sarah’s source, and fought her alter ego, I had promised both halves that I would help them become whole. There was only one way to do that, and that was to get them both to forgive themselves for what they were, and to come to some kind of agreement on who they wanted to be going forward. My bright idea to facilitate that had been to bring her to Father Tom so that she could confess to him, to earn forgiveness in the eyes of God. Maybe she really would be forgiven, or maybe it would all just be wind, but either way I hoped she could find some kind of comfort or closure in the act itself. She had hoped so too, expressing a strong desire to go ahead with the plan.

The problem now was that I hadn’t planned on her being such a wreck when I brought her in. I didn’t know if she would even be able to confess, her body currently home to a war that was raging

between the split halves of her, her voice showing that the wrong side was winning.

"Sarah," I said, leaning in and whispering in her ear. "I know you can hear me. Father Tom is here. He came to hear your confession."

"Confession," she said. "Confess to what?"

"St. Patrick's," I said. "The Beast."

"The Beast," she repeated. "Yes. I remember. Kill the Beast. Take the world."

"Help the world," I said.

She laughed. "Help? There is no help for this world." She turned her head towards Father Tom. "Are you building an ark?" she asked, laughing.

Father Tom looked at me. "This is why they weren't allowed to survive," he said to me. "It isn't because of the evil. He forgives the evil. It's the madness. It always takes them in the end, makes them too unstable. You can't be split like this. You just can't. Doing them a service, He is."

It wasn't the time or the place to discuss motives. I moved up and put my face to his. "Do you know about the Beast, Father?"

"Revelations," he said. "Of course."

"Not that Beast. The real one. The one that Lucifer and another archangel imprisoned thousands of years ago, before Lucifer fell. You seem to know everything else, I thought maybe you'd know about that one."

He rubbed his chin. "The Bible isn't meant to be taken literally, is it?" he replied. "It's good to know what that bit is about. What of it?"

"He's coming," Sarah said. "He's coming to kill you, to kill me, to kill us all. But I'll get him first. It's my world. Mine."

"We set him free," I said. "If we don't stop him, the world is going to end, and not well."

"I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you," Father Tom said. "What does that have to do with her?"

I put my hand on Sarah's forehead, wiping away some of the sweat that was forming there. "The prison doesn't hold the Beast, but it still holds most of his power. With her, he can let it all out. Without her, we can't trap him again."

He looked from me, to Sarah, and back. "So the fate of the world rests on a mad diuscrucis?" he asked, furrowing his heavy brows.

“Why did you have to pick my church?”

“Just help her,” I said. “That’s all I need you to do.”

He took a deep breath, let out a huge sigh, and got up. He walked over to the back of his office, where his ornate copy of the Bible rested. He was reverent in removing it, lifting it like a newborn, kissing it on the spine. He brought it back to the couch and kneeled down over Sarah. I noticed by the way he gazed on her, despite what she was, he felt the compassion that had already been my saving grace more than once. I had picked his church because it was the first one I had found, the one that had been closest to the Belmont. Was it coincidence, or luck? Was there even such a thing as either? With each passing hour, I was less sure.

“What is your name, child?” he asked, his voice tender.

“Name? You want to know my name? I’ll kill you first, and bathe in your blood.” She squirmed on the leather, and then settled. “Sarah,” she squeaked.

“Lord, I kneel before You a humble servant. I beseech You to hear the confession of your child, Sarah, and forgive her sins. I ask that You guide her as a shepherd guides his flock, to the Light that is Your Light. Fill her with the Strength that is Your Strength, and the Hope that is the Hope You bring to all.”

He opened the book to the center, where there was a fine velvet mark. He took his finger and ran it down the page, along a dense printing of words. He then placed his finger on Sarah’s forehead, drawing the sign of the cross with the smudge of ink he had gathered.

“I would hear your confession, my child,” he said.

I didn’t See any power in the ink, or any power in his hand. Still, the action quieted Sarah completely. Her entire expression softened, and her breathing evened out.

“Forgive me, Father,” she said at barely more than a whisper. “For I have sinned.”

She took a deep breath, and her hand came up, seeking. I reached out and took it, and she gripped it as though she might fall away from the world at any moment.

“I am torn, Father,” she said. “I have killed innocent people, defiled a holy place, and had impure thoughts. I have betrayed those who care for me, lied and stolen, and wished harm on others. I am split in half, for I love and hate in equal parts, and I cannot love more without hating more.”

“Do you love Your Lord?” he asked. “Your Lord loves you, and He will forgive you. All you have to do is ask.”

“How?” she said. Her empty eyes began welling with tears. “How can He forgive me?”

Father Tom placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “It is not for me to understand how,” he said. “Only to know that he does. All those who seek forgiveness are forgiven.”

A small smile expanded on her face. “Please. Please forgive me.” Her hand gripped mine so tightly, I thought it might break.

The Father raised his hand, making the sign of the cross. “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I absolve you of your sins.”

Sarah’s body fell limp as she let out an exhausted moan, reacting as if the weight of all existence had suddenly been lifted from her. In that moment, she looked as peaceful as I could ever remember. I felt the sudden pull of her hand in mine, and I lowered it, crossing it over her lightly undulating stomach. She was asleep.

Father Tom looked over at me. “We need to talk, laddie,” he said. He got to his feet and returned his Bible to its pedestal, and then motioned me from the room. Once we were outside, he closed the door.

“I don’t like that look,” I said to him, seeing the pain in his eyes.

“God forgive me for what I just did,” he said. “It will quiet her for a time, because she believes, but that belief will only take her so far. You can’t confess away the madness.”

“You’re saying she can still turn evil?” I asked.

He shook his head. “She *is* evil, laddie. As evil as they come, when she’s in that state of mind. She’s also good. It’s the curse of what she is, to be both sides of the same coin. She can be either at any moment, though most times she’ll be equal parts of each, like you are. It isn’t a disease you can cure, or a sin that can be forgiven. It just is. She’ll find comfort in His forgiveness for a time, but if you think that it will hold out, I’ve got directions to a pot o’ gold to sell you. Like I told you, sending her from this world to the next would be a kindness. It would be even better to do it now, when her path to Heaven is clear.”

I had been holding out hope that allowing her to confess would settle that side of her, and give her the strength to fight against it. If Father Tom was right, I had been holding onto false hope, at least in the long term. No wonder he felt guilty. He had given Sarah the

same false hope to hold onto; a rowboat in a maelstrom.

"*Josette, where are you?* " I said, calling out in my mind, wishing for her guidance. The priest was suggesting I kill Sarah, and I was starting to believe that it might really be the best thing I could do for her. Not that it mattered. She had to be alive. She had to help us fight the Beast. Somehow, regardless of anything else, I had to keep her sane until she did.

"You know I can't kill her," I said.

"Maybe not right now, while the Beast it out there. If you get him trapped, and I pray you do; you may only get one chance."

Trap the Beast, and then kill Sarah. I had sworn to protect her. Would that be breaking the promise, or keeping it? Or would she kill Charis and I first? That was the future she had seen, the one that I told her wouldn't happen. Would her murder be the only way to stop it?

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I left Sarah with Father Tom, and made my way back down to the basement. The Father had promised he would look after her for the time being, feeling confident she wouldn't wake up an angry mess. My mind was flipping through an endless stream of possibilities, switching channels until I ran the carousel back around and repeated the circle again. In the end, it all came down to one simple truth. We had the Box, and we had Sarah. What to do about her prophesied future, or my potential future, could wait until we could be sure any of us had one to begin with.

When I reached the basement, I found Charis on her knees by the rift, helping Izak by smoothing out the stone floor he had scratched the runes into. The demon was looking tense, his eyes squinted almost closed, his mouth a straight line. When he saw me, he got to his feet.

He came right up to me and leaned in close, looking into my eyes. For Josette, I was sure, and I knew he was disappointed when he didn't find her.

"She's okay," I said. "We just got separated."

He scowled and raised his hands, mimicking Ulnyx, wondering how the Were was present but the angel wasn't.

"It's a long story," I replied.

He shrugged, and tilted to look over my shoulder.

"She'll be okay too," I said. "She's sleeping."

He seemed satisfied with that.

"She called you, in your mind?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You knew where she was, just from that?"

He nodded again.

"How did you know the runes to connect the rifts?"

He stared at me.

I remembered who he was. "There's a master rune, isn't there?" I asked.

He nodded, his smile sly. If anyone would know it, he was the one.

"Does Gervais know it?"

He hesitated, but he nodded, and pointed to where the archfiend's brand used to mar his skin.

"It's not your fault," I said. "What was with Gervais anyway? He took a blessed sword in the gut, and didn't even seem to feel it." The archfiend had always been powerful, but not bleeding had never been in his bag of tricks. Neither was collapsing skyscrapers.

Izak tapped on his temple, and then his form changed as he shifted into a Gervais doppelganger. He made a motion like he was stabbing himself, and then flopped onto the floor, his eyes open. He got up and leaned in on where he had been laying, miming his hand on Gervais' shoulder, emitting a stream of hellfire towards the floor for effect.

"You think the Beast revived him?" I asked.

He held out his hand and shifted it back and forth. Not exactly. He made his body stiff, and shambled around the room.

"A zombie?" Charis asked. She had finished smoothing out the floor, and was watching his charades.

Izak nodded and pointed at her.

"Not revived," I said. "Re-animated."

"Malize said the Beast used the defeated angels as his army, piecing them back together to make his soldiers," Charis said. "He must have put Gervais back together again."

Like a twisted Humpty Dumpty. "And given him a bit of his

mojo," I said. "The tower, and the building. He decayed them until they fell apart."

"How do you kill something that isn't alive?" Charis asked.

"Cut off his head, I guess," I said. "Even if it doesn't shut him down, it'll make things difficult."

"Or burn him to ash," she suggested. "Let's see him reanimate dust."

Two thoughts, but only one I was going to voice. "If any of us fall, someone needs to make sure he can't use us," I said. "Either with fire, or decapitation."

Izak gave me the thumbs up. My attention turned to the other thought. Had the Beast done the same to Rebecca? Was he just waiting for the right moment to spring her on me? She had been almost whole the last time I had seen her, so it had to be possible, and I had to be ready for it.

"Where are Thomas and Obi?" I asked. I focused on my Sight, noting that neither were within range.

"I don't know," Charis said. "They must have left without saying anything."

I laughed. "Obi doesn't do anything without saying anything."

"Maybe I just didn't hear him. Anyway, they can both take care of themselves."

I wasn't so sure. They had said the Beast was laying siege to the city, and only Izak had been able to keep them safe. Why would they just go off on their own?

"How bad is it out there?" I asked the demon.

He shrugged again, and put his hand out flat. Whatever they were doing, they were being careful not to shift the balance. It was the quietest war I had never heard.

"Can I talk to you?" I asked Charis. We had some unfinished business, and my heart was telling me not to let it sit too long.

"Sure," she said with a smile.

I motioned for the door, glancing at Izak. He had stopped paying attention, settling down with his back against the wall, staring straight ahead.

"Izak," I said, getting his attention. "When we get back, can you teach Charis the rune?"

He looked at her, searching for something. He must have found it, because he nodded.

Charis and I started for the door. We had almost reached it when

a shadow fell from the steps and spilled into the room. There were no footfalls to be heard, but someone was definitely coming. I focused my Sight, and took a few steps back.

"Signore," Dante said as he entered the basement. He was wearing his red velvet robes, his slight frame lost in their volume. "I have news."

The entrance had been uncharacteristically straightforward. It had to be important. "Good or bad?" I asked.

"Ah. That depends on who you ask." He pulled the hem of his robe wide, reaching under it with his other hand. "After I left you at the farmhouse, I made my way to the Library of Alexandria. Not the mortal one, of course, that one burned centuries ago. There is another in Purgatory, one that still contains vast troves of information, written down by those sent to my realm to earn their way. That's where I found it."

He located the target of his search, and slipped it from the robes. It was a small piece of torn parchment, not more than the size of a fist, the edges frayed and worn. He held it out in the palm of his right hand.

We gathered around him to look at it, Izak getting to his feet to join us. Burned into the papyrus was a pictogram of a pyramid.

"I don't get it," I said. "A pyramid?"

Dante laughed, excited. "Yes," he replied. "Do you know what this means?"

"Uh, no," I said.

"Dante," Charis said. "I don't want to question you, but how do you know this has anything to do with the Beast?"

He raised the index finger of his left hand, and then reached down and flipped it over. "This is why I am excited, signore," he said. "It is good news for us. Not so good news for the Beast."

The single bit of scripture burned into the corner of the small rag was familiar, even if I couldn't read it.

"How?" Charis asked, the word coming out as more of a gasp. The writing was Templar.

"It was more simple than you would think, and in this one case I believe Mr. Ross' betrayal served a more beneficial purpose. You see, as Lord of Purgatory, I have an innate knowledge of every bit of text stored in the Library. I'm like the Google of the Middle-Ages." He laughed at his joke. We didn't. "Anyway, Mr. Ross knew this, and so at some point prior to being released, he went to the

library and destroyed anything there having to do with him. There wasn't much, I know, because I had taken a personal interest in the Beast before. Still, he made sure there was nothing."

"What about Avriel, and his Box?" I asked, interrupting.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, signore. I am limited to knowledge that has been passed on by those sent to Purgatory. The Box is an angelic device, one that had been missing for thousands of years, though I am sure Mr. Ross knew where it was the entire time. In any case, the neutral have no experience with it."

It was disappointing, but not unexpected.

"Do not be too disappointed," Dante said, reading my body language. "I remembered when I saw you last, you mentioned the name Malize. It is one that I had never heard before, and one that I have been having difficulty remembering since. Still, after coming up with nothing on the Beast, I sought out anything that might refer to him. In all of the Library, there was one single piece of parchment with his name on it. When I found this, it was pressed between the pages of an illuminated copy of the Bible."

"Let me guess," I said. "Revelations?"

Dante nodded. "The facing page was an illustration of the artist's concept of the Beast, in this case a dragon. There is no other writing on the parchment, so I assume the script says 'Malize.' That I found it where I did could not be an accident."

I looked over at Charis, who looked as shocked as I felt. "If he can't leave the cave, how would this have gotten to Purgatory?" I asked her.

"Someone must have brought it from the cave," she replied. "Just don't ask me who."

"How many people know about it?" I asked.

"Not many," she said, "and none of them could enter. Only the Divine can go in."

"I believe we have enough mysteries to handle right now," Dante said. "How it got there is not so important. What is important is what it means. It is clearly a suggestion to seek answers in a pyramid."

I felt Izak tap me on the shoulder. When I turned towards him, he brought his hands together in a pyramid shape and brought them down, over and over again. Then he held his hands out to his sides.

"Izak's right," I said. "There are over a hundred pyramids in

Egypt, and that's assuming he's referring to an Egyptian one. Oh, and that's only the ones that have been discovered. Don't get me wrong, it's great to get a hint, but time is one thing that isn't on our side."

Dante pursed his lips, but didn't say anything. Nobody said anything, until a few uncomfortable moments of silence had passed.

"It is what we have, signore," the poet said. "If we must, we will search every pyramid on this Earth, because what will happen if we do not is untenable."

"He's right," Charis said, putting her hand on my shoulder and squeezing.

I knew it was true, but that didn't make it any less frustrating. The pompous, arrogant, evil smile invaded my consciousness, leering at me. There was no way I was going to let the Beast win.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's been a rough couple of days. We'll head to Egypt to see if we can find the path we're being led towards. I think we should make a pit-stop in Paris and get our hands on Avriel first. We have the Box, which means he's the Beast's most probable next target."

"Agreed," Charis said. "We need to reach him before he does."

Dante smiled. "Excellent," he said. "I will return to Purgatory to see if I can find anything to help you narrow your search. I'll let you know as soon as I find something of value. Here, take this." He handled the piece of papyrus like it was an infant, passing it carefully over to me.

With that he was gone, vanishing in the space between one moment of time and the next. The three of us stood together, saying nothing, until Izak broke it up by returning to his spot on the floor. I took the parchment and focused, finding the weakness and age in the structure, and putting it back together, strengthening it enough so that I could fold it up and stick it in my pocket. I could imagine Dante making his angry face at me for doing it.

Charis' hand was still on my shoulder, and she squeezed it again as she leaned up and in, her lips brushing against my ear. The move reminded me of when she had given me the Grail, and her warning. Even then, when I believed she was the enemy, her closeness had electrified me.

"You wanted to talk?" she asked. "In private?" Her breath was warm, and it smelled like cinnamon.

"I did," I said, reaching up and taking her hand, holding it in my

own. I turned to face her, so I could look into her eyes. I could see the flames behind them, the red soul of the demon Vilya watching everything from her place within. I hadn't looked in a mirror lately, but I was sure my eyes were red these days too. I took a deep breath, my heart throbbing in my chest, every muscle feeling a charged ache from being near her. Privacy would be good. I leaned forward, tilting my head and placing it against hers. "But now I can't remember what I was going to say."

Our noses were almost touching. I could feel the heat from the blood running through her face, and smell the mixture of her breath and hair and skin with the heightened senses Ulnyx provided. It was intoxicating.

"You don't need to say anything," she replied. Her mouth was right there, her lips parted, inviting mine to join them. Never before in my life had I wanted anything else as much.

I pulled back. I regretted it right way, because I didn't know when I would get another chance, but I also knew it was what I had to do. She knew it too, because she didn't get mad, or embarrassed, or shy.

"You owe me," was all she said, and then she smiled. The ease of it made me smile too. "So I guess we're headed to France. You know where Avriel is?"

"I know where I left him," I replied. Hanging from a meat-hook, being tortured by one of the most powerful demons ever created. I wasn't thrilled about the prospect of going back there. I had promised the angel I would end his misery, and then reneged because it didn't suit me. I didn't regret that decision, I just hated that I was going to have to take the consequences head-on. Being Divine didn't take away every level of my human cowardice. This would be a lot easier if Josette were around to help me talk to him.

Charis let go of my hand. "We should get a move on then," she said.

I nodded, but hesitated. "*Josette* ." I called out for her, focusing and reaching for the frayed ends of our connection, trying to pull them together, to smooth them out. Chaos raced along the trail, my mind pulled in so many directions. Avriel, the Beast, Gervais, Sarah, Rebecca. Why did it always come back to Rebecca? Even when I let go and accepted my growing attachment to my counterpart?

"You saw what happened, between the angel and I?" I asked.

"You did what you had to do," she said.

“Tell that to Avriel. You needed Vilya back to get us through the rift. I need Josette back if we’re going to convince him to help us. He was called ‘the Just’ for a reason.”

“Landon, there isn’t time,” she said. “Especially if the Beast’s next move is to bring Abaddon under his sway. If he gets the demon on his side, and sends him for Sarah…”

She didn’t need to finish the sentence. I knew what would happen. Sarah would try to Command him, and if she failed, she would be taken, and we would be destroyed. Abaddon had caused Izak to run. She would fail.

“I’m close,” I said. “I just need a chance to rest for a little while.” It was a lie. I had no idea how close I was, but the feeling that I needed Josette was becoming more concrete in my soul. Or was it my backbone?

“Landon!” The shout came from the top of the steps. Obi. I tapped Charis’ eyes with my own, and we rushed up the stairs, Izak not far behind.

The first thing I noticed was the blood, running in a tight red line, following the seam of the hallway’s stone floor. My first thought was that Obi was hurt, but it was wrong. The second thing I saw was the former marine, kneeling close to the floor, cradling a woman in his arms. Thomas was standing behind him, a nasty gash in his cheek. The second thought was confusion, and the third anger. The woman was Divine, an angel, Melody. Her toga-like dress was stained red along her stomach, and her tucked wings hung limp behind her, the blood using them to run down off her body to the floor, creating the line I had followed.

The fact that she was bleeding could only mean one thing. She had been attacked by one of her own, with a blessed weapon. The fact that she still had her wings, meant that her attackers had traded in theirs for a different set.

“There’s holy water in the rectory,” I said, running over and dropping to my knees opposite Obi. “Thomas, go.”

The angel looked dazed. He glanced down at me, and then turned and headed off to get the healing agent.

“Melody,” I said, my voice soft. “Can you hear me.”

Her eyes were closed, but they fluttered open when I spoke to her. A small smile made it onto her lips. “Landon,” she said. “I came to… to warn you.” Her voice was broken and weak. The rectory wasn’t far, but she was as close to gone as I could imagine. Thomas

wasn't going to make it.

I reached down to her stomach, finding the hole in her garment where the sword had stabbed her. "You aren't going to die today," I said, closing my eyes to focus on the wound. We needed to hear whatever she had to say, and I knew Obi had the hots for her. Then there was the third reason to heal her. A selfish reason.

I had healed Josette once this way. It was the only other time I had even tried it, but the action felt familiar as I concentrated on the wound, finding the torn internals and willing them back together, knitting the muscle and tissue and staunching the bleeding. I could hear activity around me, a subliminal understanding of speech and motion, but I didn't pay it any mind. I pushed my energy into her, feeling her flesh grow warm to the touch, and knowing that she would live.

My eyes opened, and I pulled back my hand. I was weak, but not weak enough. The selfish reason. I wanted to pass out, to find the sleep that was the only thing that would put Josette and I back together again. It was denied to me, but at least I had saved her.

"What do you think you're doing, laddie?" Father Tom was leaning over me, yelling into my ear. Charis had a grip on his arm, trying to pull him away. Obi's face was stretched tight with concern, and Thomas was holding out a paper cup filled with holy water. "You have no right to touch the flesh of such a creature."

I flipped my gaze over to meet his, and didn't back down. I managed to maintain my calm as I spoke. "I just saved her life," I said.

"You did," Melody said, her voice quiet but strong. I looked away from Father Tom to check on her. Her eyes were open, staring up at me with a reverence and respect I didn't deserve. "Thank you."

"Melody," Obi said, leaning down over her. "I'm happy to see you, but can we meet under better circumstances next time?"

"Now what fun would that be?" she replied, reaching up and tapping his cheek.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"A little out of sorts, but I'll survive, thanks to you."

"Father Tom, do you have a bed, or another couch?" I knew the one in his office was already taken.

"She can swap with me," Sarah said. She had come up behind the priest, her face haggard but more relaxed than it had been since

the day she had been taken. It was good to see, even knowing it wasn't going to last.

"Come on then," Father Tom said. "Clear a path. Carry her in, and be gentle boy-o."

Obi lifted Melody as he rose to his feet, and carried her easily past us and into the Father's office. The priest genuflected when they passed.

"I can't even begin to understand the Lord's plan for me in all of this," Father Tom whispered as we shuffled into the office behind them.

The Beast was loose, Abaddon was free, and angels were attacking angels. I wasn't convinced the Lord had any plan at all, or that His eyes were even open. Maybe there was some twist of fate involved, and maybe there wasn't. We were all here, now, and we knew what we had to do. "I'm the last person who can answer that for you, Father," I said," but I'm thankful for your hospitality."

Obi laid Melody on the couch, still warm and indented from where Sarah had been laying. Melody fluttered her wings once and sunk into the leather, squeezing the former marine's hand before allowing him to withdraw.

"Okay," I said, resting with my back against the desk. "What the heck is going on?"

Melody turned her head so she could see me. A bead of moisture began to form under her eyes. "They don't believe in the Beast," she said. "They don't believe he's real."

My eyes shifted to the splotch of red on her stomach. "They attacked you," I pointed out. "You're saying they weren't servants?"

She shrugged. "I don't know if those blokes were servants or not. After you fled the farmhouse, I had a little chat with the two you left eating dirt." She smirked. "They dragged me back to Heaven, and brought me before Kassie."

"She's the Head Inquisitor," Thomas said, before I could ask.

"Kassie forced me to Confess, again. She was anything but gentle. I told her everything I knew about you, from the first time we had met in the airport." She shifted her gaze to Izak. "They made me tell them who he is. They're scared, knowing he's with you. They thought he was out of play."

Izak's grin was priceless. He might have softened up since meeting Josette, but he took delight in his reputation.

"They said I was sullied, and would need Cleansing."

I heard Thomas gasp behind me. “Cleansing?”

“When Confession isn’t enough,” Thomas said. “It’s an… interesting … form of torture. It’s supposed to purge impurities from your soul. The Inquisitors created it as a way to get information without being cast out for cruelty.”

Heaven got more interesting with every bit I learned. Even with all of their black and white rules, there was still room for a lot of gray, and it didn’t sound pleasant at all.

“The details aren’t important,” Melody said. “Kassie ordered me to be Cleansed. My interactions with you, and your demon, and my…” She paused and looked at Obi. “My growing affection for your sidekick supposedly poisoned me.”

“Man, why do I have to be the sidekick?” Obi asked. “I’m bigger than you. And smarter.”

“Let’s see you turn into a fourteen-foot tall beast monster,” I replied.

“Boys, can we focus?” Charis said, her tight smile betraying her amusement. I still thought levity was the best cure for tension, and I could always rely on Obi to instigate.

“So you escaped?” I asked.

“They were bringing me to the Cleansing chamber. I used a move Obi taught me, getting free and making a run for it. I was almost away, but Kassie managed to head me off. We fought. I lost.”

“But you didn’t fall,” Sarah said.

“I didn’t use my weapon against her. I knew what it would mean. I never expected her to stab me, but she was furious.”

“So she fell?”

Melody shook her head. “Inquisitors have extra leeway, as long as their motives are pure. She didn’t stab me out of malice, but because she thought I was a threat to all of the seraphim. She’ll have to answer to an archangel, and likely Confess to be sure her actions were appropriate, but it isn’t an automatic out. Anyway, Obi had given me a cell. I called him, found out where he was, and came to him.”

“That’s why you went outside?” I asked. He nodded. “So, you came to warn me. About what?”

“Kassie,” she said. “The Inquisitors are convinced you have a Canaan Blade, and they’re going to come down on you hard to get it. They may even get Gabriel involved. Like I said, they don’t believe the Beast is real.”

“Don’t they know they’ve got demons and angels right outside of this church attacking both sides?”

“Landon,” Thomas said. “The angels are only attacking demons. They may be helping the demon servants locate targets, but it’s business as usual as far as Heaven knows.”

I took a deep breath, and kicked my foot back against the desk, hearing the wood crack behind the force. Father Tom winced at the sound, and I immediately felt guilty. “Bad to worse,” I said. “What the hell is so important about those swords?”

“I told you everything I know,” Thomas replied. “I wish I could tell you more.”

“I know,” I said. I brought my hands up, resting my head in them. I needed time to think, to rest, to take a breath and escape from being me for a minute or two. The Beast, Abaddon, Gervais, Sarah, Inquisitors, Avriel, Josette. It was too much to deal with at one time.

“*Just kill ‘em all* ,” Ulnyx said, choosing the wrong time to make his opinion known.

“*Shut up* ,” I replied, ignoring the resulting laughter.

“Landon?” Obi asked. “You okay, man?”

I hesitated. “No. I’m not.” I dropped my hands and stared down at the floor. “I didn’t sign up for this.”

Charis was at my side in a second, her arm draped around my shoulders. “It’s okay,” she said. “None of us did. Not like this. Take a look around for a second though. An angel, a demon, a priest, a fallen angel, a mortal, a pure diuscrucis, me. We’re a motley bunch, but we represent every facet of what God created, either directly or indirectly.” She swung around in front of me, putting her hand under my chin, lifting my head to meet my eyes with hers. “You brought us together. You. We’re all on your side first and foremost, regardless of our personal reasons. There is nothing out there that could have planned for that, or planned to go up against that. Maybe you can’t do it on your own, but you don’t have to.”

It was a good speech. A little cheesy, but effective. I smiled at her and nodded. “You’re right,” I said. “Thank you all for being here.”

“Anytime, man,” Obi said, speaking for all of them.

“So now what?” Sarah asked.

I looked at her, and then at Melody. “Now it’s time for a nap,” I said.

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I kicked everyone out of the office, except for Melody, Charis, and Sarah. Obi protested the loudest, but he was still evicted. My motivation might have been dubious, but the fact is that I believed I needed Josette back, and that was enough. Charis was right in that I had brought a disparate and diverse group together by following my path without question, so it only made sense to keep going with the flow, rather than rushing against the tide.

"Are you ready?" I asked Melody. I had taken her spot on the couch, and she and Sarah were kneeling over me, next to one another. Charis was standing behind my head. She didn't have to be there, but I had wanted her nearby.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It's tough having Ulnyx in here without anyone to help keep him quiet."

"*You're getting on my nerves* ," the Great Were said in response. "*We don't need the White Princess back* ."

"*Didn't I tell you to shut up?* " I replied.

My hope was that Josette would help me deal with Avriel, and

maybe even the Inquisitors. If she knew anything about the Canaan Blades, that would be an extra special bonus. I figured we could fix the connection if I were sleeping, the same way Charis had with Vilya, but that was going to take some time. My new plan was to have Melody and Sarah Calm me, together, and hopefully put me into a state of being that sped up the process.

"Just don't ask me anything personal," I said to Melody.

"Like the color of your knickers?" she laughed.

"I'm not wearing knickers," I lied.

"Naughty, naughty."

I closed my eyes and breathed in, a deep breath that caught the smell of Charis standing behind me. The warm cinnamon of her was comforting, and I focused on pulling apart every molecule of it.

"Tell me about Josette," Melody said. I felt the pressure of her Calming words, my mind reflexively trying to defend against it. I doubled my efforts to capture Charis' essence. I hadn't been sure Melody would be strong enough to Calm me, which is why I had Sarah standing by.

"Yes, Landon," she said. "Tell me about mother. Tell me about how you met, and what she means to you."

The words started flowing without thought or effort. It wasn't that I even recognized when the Calm began to take hold. First it hadn't, and then it had. "The Apple Store, of all things," I said. "I was trying to keep a low profile, to get some information and figure out what I was supposed to do. She saw me, and I saw her, and I don't know… it didn't start that well, but there was just something about her. We were always meant to meet, I think. We were always meant to be friends, or something…"

I knew I was still talking, somewhere in the back of my mind. I knew words were still coming out, because I caught a phrase every now and then, "plain, but pretty", "fun and exciting", "taught me so much". The world was dark behind my closed eyes, dark and comfortable and calm. It was peaceful in a way I hadn't experienced in years, and that peacefulness picked up the world I was in, and carried it away. Or maybe it carried me away, from the trouble and the worry to somewhere else, another life, another existence, I don't know. The important thing was that I was there, and he was there, and *she* was there.

I couldn't see her, but I could feel her. The same feeling she had left at the Belmont, that first time. The indelible sense of her, that

she was present, and had been present. It was something I hadn't gotten from any other angel I had met, and I had met quite a few.

"I guess we should find her," Ulnyx said.

We were standing on a white marble floor, surrounded by marble posts from which hung huge swatches of white gossamer fabric that shifted and billowed in a soft breeze. The sky was bright and blue above us, and everything about the place reminded me of her.

The fabric was translucent, and looking through the surrounding weaves revealed more posts and more cloth; a maze of silk. I turned to Ulnyx. The Were was out of place here, with his destroyed blue jeans and 'F*ck Good' t-shirt. A thought, and he was in a tux.

"Have some respect," I said. A half-smile was his only reply. "Josette."

I called out to her. The sound of my voice echoed into the sky, and reverberated through the maze, but there was no reply. I shouldn't have expected this to be easy.

"We can just cut through the cloth," Ulnyx said, his hand growing out into his weapon of choice.

I was inclined to agree, but it ran counter to the metaphor. "No. Try to think peaceful."

He laughed. "Me? Should I sit in lotus position and start ohming?"

"Just follow me."

I walked past the first opening in the posts, and turned right, following the fabric twenty yards and then making a left. Every few seconds, I called out for Josette again.

"Do you think she knows we're here?" Ulnyx asked.

"I don't even know where here is," I said. "But I hope so."

The where was the interesting part. Was this her Source? Was it mine? What had being Calm tag-teamed done to me? I focused, trying to lift myself into the sky, a test to see if we were in Purgatory. Nothing happened.

"Landon."

The voice came from around the corner, and I could see the shape of the speaker through the fabric.

"Sarah," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I felt you calling," she replied. "So I came."

She was wearing a modest white dress that covered her shoulders and fell to her ankles. Her hair was put up like she was

headed to a wedding, and her red-gold eyes sparkled in the light.

"She's here," I said. "I just don't know where."

"I know. I can feel her too. We'll find her together."

"Hey, don't forget about me, hot stuff," Ulnyx said.

We started walking again, threading through the posts, plotting a course through the maze. It didn't take long for me to discover that even when I intentionally made a square, we never wound up back in the same place.

"Do you know where we are?" I asked Sarah while we walked.

"Your soul," she replied. "It reflects your emotions and your feelings. You're at peace, but conflicted. Why are you conflicted, brother?"

I wasn't having that conversation here, or now. "You don't know?"

"What I told you… about killing you?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. It was part, but not all.

She smiled, her entire face brightening. "It doesn't have to happen, and it won't happen. I know you'll protect me."

I kept myself focused on the path ahead. Protect her by killing her?

There was no way to measure how much time passed. It seemed like hours, and I would have lost hope, except I could feel Josette slowly growing closer. I understood the maze to be my conflict, and maybe Josette would help me come to some kind of resolution. In order to smooth the edges, to reconnect with her wounded soul, I had to accept whatever would come to be.

The marble floors and walls of white cloth slowly began to fade away, replaced with a thick layer of low green grass forming the shore of a small lake. A thin fall of water tumbled from the spring sky, splashing gently into the pool and kicking up an invisible mist that tickled my face. It was in the pool, floating face up, her arms crossed over her chest, that I found her.

I know right away she wasn't dead, only resting. Waiting.

"Stay here," I said to Sarah and Ulnyx, deliberate in my fully-clothed entry to the lake, calm as I waded in to retrieve her. The water was only waist deep when I reached her. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was steady. I put my arms under her and lifted, the water streaming from her white dress as it emerged into the warm air. "Josette," I whispered. "Can you hear me?"

She smiled before she opened her eyes. "Landon. I knew you

would come. It's been lonely here, but I've tried to stay centered."

I leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Of course you did," I said. "Sarah is with me."

Her eyes beamed. "She is here? Now?"

I nodded, but took a serious tone. "We're in a lot of trouble," I said. "Sarah most of all."

It didn't quell her spirit. "We will overcome," was all she said.

I carried her to the shore, and lowered her to her feet. Sarah rushed over, wrapping her arms around the angel with the fierceness reserved for mother and child.

"I'm so happy to see you," she cried.

"As am I," Josette replied. "I'm proud of you Sarah, for turning away from the destruction of the Beast."

It didn't seem possible, but she dug her head deeper into her mother's shoulder. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for being here, for giving yourself up for me. For sending Landon."

Ulnyx approached them, falling into a deep bow. "Princess," he said, his voice half a snarl.

"Monster," she replied. They both smiled.

Sarah broke her embrace, and mother and daughter stood face to face, just looking at one another.

"I never imagined I would get to hold you again," Josette said. "To see you here, to look on you." She glanced over at me. "I didn't know what waited, when I gave up my soul to you."

"I didn't think I would ever know you at all," Sarah said. "Izak told me about you, about how gentle and good you are, and how I should be proud to be like you. I want to keep making you proud."

"You will," Josette said.

Her faith drove a knife into my chest. You can't stop the madness. Only delay it. I decided not to tell Josette what the Father had said. Not yet. She deserved this moment.

"What of the Beast?" she asked me.

"He is gathering his power," I said. "He's still trying to get Sarah, because he can't juice up enough to take Heaven and Hell without maxing out his levels. He already made one grab for her. He…"

"Sent father to take me," Sarah interrupted.

"Gervais is alive?" Josette asked, her shock evident.

"No," I said. "The Beast brought him back. He's not living."

"More like a puppet without strings," Ulnyx said.

“But we retrieved Avriel’s Box, and Dante found a clue left by the angel Malize.”

“Who?”

“The angel Malize. You were there, in the cave with Charis and me. Do you remember?”

She shook her head. “I remember the cave. I don’t recall an angel.”

The Forgotten. “It doesn’t matter,” I said. “We need to go back to Paris and rescue Avriel from Abaddon. I don’t think I’m at the top of his friends list, so I was hoping you would be able to reach him.”

She sighed. “Landon, you made a promise to him, and then broke it. You put him back to be cruelly tortured by the demon.”

“I know,” I said. “I didn’t know I would need him again.”

She sighed again. “Listen to yourself, brother. This is not only about what you need or don’t need in any given moment.”

It stung, but I deserved it. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“There is always a choice. You took the easy path, because it was easy. It is fitting that you aren’t finding it so easy now.”

I couldn’t disagree. “So you won’t help me?”

“I will help you,” she replied. “My advice is to be respectful, and apologetic. Sincerely apologetic. Avriel is known for his sense of justice, and he is a faithful hand of the Lord. He will forgive, if you are true.”

“She told you,” Ulnyx said.

“Shut up.”

“I know every moment is precious,” Josette said. “Still, I would be grateful for a few minutes to spend with my daughter.”

I would never deny her that, even if the world were collapsing around us. “Come on Ullie,” I said. I could sense him bristle at the nickname.

We wandered away from them, going to sit by the lake.

“What do you think she’s saying to her?” Ulnyx asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You going to tell her that her kid’s psycho?”

“You’re one to talk,” I replied.

“Look, meat, I may not be the nicest guy around, but at least I’m stable.”

I looked out at the waterfall, pouring from the sky. “I don’t think it’ll help. Not now anyway. With any luck, having her mother

around will keep her on the golden path until we can get the Beast in the Box. We can worry about her prognosis after that."

"I'm not looking forward to it," he said.

"If it means we stopped the Beast, I'll take what I can get," I replied. They were words spoken, but not words that sat well. Sarah was two inches from coming apart at the seams, and I was going to have to watch helplessly while it happened.

We were sitting silent when Sarah and Josette approached. They were holding hands, and Sarah looked more content than I could ever remember seeing her. Enjoy the moment, anyway. It was the only thing I could do.

"We're ready," Sarah said. "Let's go catch a Beast."

I closed my eyes, and tried to will myself awake. It didn't happen. "Somebody needs to wake me up," I said.

"It's nice to see you so calm, brother," Sarah replied. "Even if it is forced." She squeezed Josette's hand one last time, and vanished. A moment later, the earth around us began quaking, knocking us to our knees.

"See you around, meat," Ulnyx said.

The world darkened and disappeared.

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“Well, what do you think?”

We were all gathered in Father Tom’s office, all except Izak. The priest was sitting behind his desk, looking worried, while the rest of us took up the extra chairs and sofa. I had only been out for about an hour, but it was long enough to be concerned that Kassie and the Inquisitors would pop in at any moment. Kassie and the Inquisitors. I pictured angels playing electric guitars.

Obi turned the papyrus over and looked at the script on the back. “I don’t know, man,” he said. “I’m not that clean on my Egyptian antiquities, and I don’t know that much about pyramids. This drawing looks like a standard triangle with a few lines so you know its more than just a triangle.”

I reached out to take it back. “Don’t worry about it. I figured I’d ask.”

He didn’t hand it back over right away. He turned it over to the pyramid side again and stared at it. “You know, I do remember reading something not too long ago, about the Great Pyramid. There’s this guy… I can’t remember his name. Hamas or something.

Anyway, he claimed that there's a secret chamber inside. I read about it online somewhere. I know, that's probably not that helpful." Obi handed the papyrus back.

"I'll take what I can get right now," I said. "It may sound like a long shot, but what else do we have? We'll start with the Great Pyramid."

I put the fragment back in my pocket, and set myself to deliver the news.

"I need you to stay behind," I said, bracing for impact.

"Aww, come on, man," Obi complained. "You need me, and I'm sick of getting left behind. Heck, I just gave you your only lead. I should be there to see if it pans out."

"Someone has to stay here and keep Kassie off our tails." I said. "We can't fight both of these battles at the same time."

It wasn't my favorite approach either, because as resilient as the former Marine was, I didn't think he could stand up to the seraph. What I *did* think he could do was get creative, and keep her dashing at shadows while we tried to reach Avriel. I would have preferred to leave Izak with him, but now that he and Sarah had been reunited, he outright refused to leave her side.

I put my hand on his shoulder and leaned in. "You're the only one I can trust to do this."

"Look on the bright side," Melody said. "You get to spend more time with me."

"I don't think we'll have much time to ourselves while we're playing hide and seek with Miss Inquisition," he replied. He was upset, but there was nothing I could do about it.

"If the seraph shows up here, I'll be defrocked for sure," Father Tom said. "Harboring three diuscrucis, and a demon of all things. The sooner you all get out of my church, the better I'll feel."

"Obi?" I knew he would acquiesce. He always did, but it made him feel better to complain first.

"Yeah, okay, man," he said, after a silent pause. "So Kassie is going to be following Melody, right? Because she thinks she's with you, or will lead her to you." He looked at the angel. "But are you with us?"

Melody's face contracted, and she looked torn. "I'm with you, Landon, as long as what you're doing is in line with the Lord's plan. The Lord trapped the Beast once, I don't think He intended for it to be free. I can't help that my brothers and sisters refuse to see the

truth. It's easy to deny what we don't want to see."

It wasn't a full pledge of support, but I hadn't expected one. We'd still come a long way since our first meeting. "Thanks, Melody," I said.

"What are we waiting for?" Sarah asked. She was looking much better, having found a shower and a change of clothes in the short time since I had woken. She had lost the ringlets in her hair, choosing to contain the natural curl by pulling it back into a tight ponytail. The makeshift dress had been traded for a pair of jeans and a simple black pullover hoodie she'd found in a box awaiting pickup by Goodwill.

"Nothing," I replied. I swiveled my gaze around to Obi, to Melody, to Thomas, and to Father Tom. "Good luck, all of you. Stay safe."

Obi reached out, taking my hand in his and clasping it tight. "You too," he said, leaning in and clapping me on the back. "We'll keep you clear to do what you need to do."

"I know," I said. With that, I made for the door, Charis and Sarah following behind.

We headed down the hallway and back into the basement, where Izak was putting the finishing touches on a rebuilt transport rift. I felt kind of stupid for asking him to get rid of it, and then remake it, but I hadn't been thinking very clearly at the time. I could sense his anger when I had made the new request, but it had subsided when he had noticed the change in my eyes.

"How's it coming Izak?" I asked as we entered. He was crouched in front of the rift, his hands clasped together. The runes flared to life. "I never doubted."

"Father Tom is going to crap the rosary when he finds this thing," Sarah said.

I knew it, but there was nobody on this side who could take it apart. Besides that, I wasn't sure we wouldn't need it again. The best I could hope for was that he wouldn't turn us in to the Inquisitors as soon as he saw what we had done.

"Sounds painful," I said. I didn't even slow on the approach, hitting the edge of the circle, and stepping through.

I was surprised by my location when I came out the other side. I had just assumed that Gervais' personal rift would have been destroyed when the Beast had sent his servants after Lylyx and Izak, but on emerging I found myself walking down a gilded stone

platform in an overdone neoclassical hodgepodge of artwork and furniture. My eyes immediately went to the four posted bed that served as the centerpiece of the room, and my breath caught on the memory that hung there in the stale air. It was a memory I had relived a hundred times or more.

Sarah came through next. It was her birth I was seeing, but not from my own eyes. Gervais had taken her from Josette, and thrown his sister out the window.

"*Landon* ." Josette's voice was a tonic to my whirring thoughts. "*Let the past stay there.* "

That was the trick, of course. I looked away, to the door at the far end of the room. It was hanging open. I focused my Sight. It told me the home was deserted, but in the back of my mind I half-expected Gervais, or maybe even Rebecca to come charging through.

"There's no way the Beast wouldn't expect us to come here," I said. I felt the energy of the rift subside as Izak came through and shut it down.

"Another trap?" Charis asked.

"Whatever it is, I guarantee it won't be as easy as going in, and getting out." Unless he wanted us to just come in, and get out. I didn't know which scenario worried me more. "Izak, lead the way."

The demon gave me the thumbs up and took the front of the line, taking us away from the open door, towards the corner of the bedroom. There was a marble statue of the archfiend there, his face a diabolical grimace, his hands up over his head in victory. Izak waved a stiff arm, and the statue flew away, smashing against the right-hand wall.

Satisfied, he reached for the wall, his hand sinking through a glamour that I couldn't see beyond. He manipulated something, and then beckoned for us to wait. A few seconds later, he waved for us to follow, and he walked through the glamour.

We were in an elevator, with rich wood walls and plenty of gold inlays. Izak didn't press any of the buttons on the inside, but I could feel him reaching out with his power. The elevator began to sink.

"Is this an express?" I asked. He glanced over at me, but didn't respond.

"Why do you think the Beast wouldn't have set his goons here to wait for us? Gervais especially?"

I was surprised that Sarah was the one asking about her father,

and so nonchalantly. “We know he had his heart set on convincing Abaddon to join him. If he has Abaddon, he can do whatever he wants with Avriel.”

“Kill him?”

Or use him to bait another trap.

The elevator slowed to a stop, and the doors opened. Another glamour. We stepped through it, and I found myself in familiar surroundings.

Before, the machinery and computers had been whole. Before, there had been a gurney with a corpse on it. Before, Gervais had been hanging from a chain, left as a gift from Rebecca as incentive for me to join her cause; the Beast’s cause. Now, the chain hung alone, and the rest of the lab had been torn apart, mangled, and burned. Whatever Gervais had been researching, it was all gone.

“What was he researching?” Sarah asked. Izak stopped walking and turned to her. He frowned and shook his head.

“Okay,” she said, dropping the subject.

I knew the way from here, so I took the lead. Out of the laboratory, past the torture room, to the cells where Josette lived during her pregnancy. It was here that Sarah stopped again, putting her face to the bars and looking in on the room. She didn’t say anything. Her expression didn’t even change. She just stared in until Izak took her arm and gently pulled her away.

Out of the prison and up the steps, down a hallway of rooms stocked with supplies, and into the small room where the rift between the Paris sewers and the Chateau sat. Still, there was no sign of any Divine, no suggestion of anyone mortal, immortal, or in-between. With each step I began to get more nervous, more concerned that we were being careless, reckless, thoughtless, and foolish. The doubt began to gnaw at me, picking its way into me and planting thorny seeds.

“This is a mistake,” I said. Izak was bent over the rift, about to bring it to life. “It’s too easy.”

“What choice do we have?” Charis asked. “We need Avriel to help us with the box.”

“Do we?” I was having second thoughts. “We’re just assuming since he made the thing, he can work some kind of magic that will ensure it can contain the Beast. Maybe it already can? Or maybe, it never can?”

“Which is why we need to ask him,” Charis said. “It’s better to

find out from a reliable source than to risk everything. Even if it feels like we're walking right into a trap. Again."

"It worked out okay last time," Sarah piped in. "The Beast thinks he's smarter than we are. He's arrogant. We can use that to our advantage."

I looked at her like she had two heads. This wasn't the Sarah that Gervais had turned into a whimpering mound of hurt. "It looks like I'm outvoted."

Izak had paused his work while we argued. Seeing it settled, he went back to the runes. Within moments, they flared up.

What happened then was nine seconds of pure chaos, so quick and so dirty that there was no time to even try to decipher it. The very moment the runes came to life, the room grew cold, so cold, and a shadow of a form appeared in the rift.

One second: Abaddon had come into the small room, so close to me that I could almost see the demon behind the shadows, a sharp, dark-fleshed, humanoid face with rich blood eyes obscured by the swirling darkness of his power.

Two seconds: Sarah started to scream, the words deep in pitch and tone at the slow-motion speed in which I remembered them. It wasn't a scream of fear, even though that was the effect of the vaporous tentacles that flowed out across the space. It was a scream of Command.

Three seconds: Izak dove towards Sarah, his hand getting a firm grip on her wrist, his body shifting and pivoting. Her words launched forward at the demon, and I felt her power as a wave of pressure on my soul.

Four seconds: I was close to it. I found my focus and fought back against the fear, pulling energy into me, cocking my fist back. The demon stood in its spot in front of the rift.

Five seconds: I heard the *snikt* of Charis' sword coming free of its scabbard on her back, as she prepared to face the demon. Maybe the fear subsided due to Sarah's command, or maybe I had just overcome it for just a moment, but it was enough for me to let the fist fly, shifting my weight and angle to I could pummel it from the side.

Six seconds: The blow struck Abaddon hard, making pure, solid contact with an actual creature of flesh and blood, and sending him toppling away from the rift.

Seven seconds: Izak had seen the attack, and he pulled Sarah,

yanking her through the rift with him.

Eight seconds: I felt the breath fall out of me as Charis rushed me from behind, crashing into me and throwing us both through the circle.

Nine seconds: In the sewers of Paris, the fiend Izak, the demon once known as Mephistopheles, had already put his hand into the runes to shut the rift down. Hellfire crawled along him, and the smell of his burning flesh was overpowering. His face bore no sign of pain, though it must have been excruciating. Instead, he was deliberate and steady in his concentration, working to manually scratch away part of the still-burning circle to disable it.

Once it was done, he fell onto his back, clutching his forearm with his other hand. Smoke rose from the wound, and I could see that below where he held there was nothing but charred and useless flesh.

"Oh, no," Sarah said. "Izak." She bent over him, trying to offer comfort. He held out his good hand and pushed himself away.

"Izak," I said. I kept looking at the no longer identifiable mass of skin and bone at the end of his arm. I couldn't heal that.

He held his good hand out to me as well, and shook his head. His eyes squinted in pain, and he took a few deep breaths. Then he got to his feet, and motioned in the direction of the bone room.

"You are a serious badass," I said. He glanced over at me, and shrugged.

"*There is no way to heal that. Not ever* ," Josette said. "*That wound will fester and bring him pain for the rest of his eternity.* "

"*He's played with hellfire before,* " I replied.

"*He's never touched it. The fire he wields sits above the skin, too close to see, but it never touches.* "

I stared at the demon's back as he started walking down the corridor. Badass indeed.

We hurried to catch up to him, my mind trying to sort out what had just happened, and what it meant. Abaddon had obviously been lying in wait for the rift to become active, which meant that either the Beast had been successful in his recruiting efforts, or the demon had just decided he'd had enough and wanted to catch the next, closest train out. The former seemed a lot more plausible.

It didn't take much of a stretch to assume that Ross had believed Abaddon would overwhelm us, especially in ambush, and get a hold on Sarah. As before, he had underestimated our own resilience. Or

maybe just the square footage of the room Gervais kept his rift in. I doubt that he had considered Sarah's ability to at least confuse the demon with her Command, or the power of my right hook. I certainly hadn't.

There was one thing about it that was bothering me above everything else, and as we turned the corner and spilled out into the bone room, my fear was confirmed. The huge wooden crucifix was still foisted in the center of the room, but Avriel was gone.

"This can't be good," Sarah said, breaking a silence that stretched out too long.

I approached the cross, scanning the ground around it for any sign of dust that might be the remains of the seraph. The area around the structure was clean. He might have still been alive. He might have been in the hands of the Beast, being tortured anew by something worse than the worst demon around. I felt the guilt welling up again, and I had to close my eyes to force it back down. This is what we had come for? This is what Izak had given up his hand and would live in eternal pain for? I had felt this was a mistake, and I hated being proven right.

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“Is he dead?” I asked. I wasn’t asking anyone in particular, and I didn’t expect a reply.

“Does it matter?” Charis kicked at the ground in front of the cross. “We’re not going to get what we wanted this time.”

“What if he tells the Beast how to disable the Box?” Sarah asked.

“There’s nothing we can do about it, but I have a feeling it will take quite a bit to break him, after what he’s been through with Abaddon.” The guilt again.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the folded up piece of papyrus. I held it up to the others. “This is all we’ve got now,” I said. “This, and no nearby rift.”

I didn’t even ask Izak if he could make us a new one. The script that formed the rift circles was more intricate than I could even describe, which is why so few demons could create their own. Izak had reached in to save us without thinking, doing so with his dominant hand. His writing hand.

“Don’t forget that Abaddon is topside,” Charis said. “Not that I’m trying to make things worse, but we know he’s in play for the

Beast."

"Closest rift?" It was the only thing that mattered right now, unless we wanted to drive back to Gervais' chateau to challenge Abaddon. After barely getting away from him, I wasn't enamored with the idea.

"We can take the train from Paris to London," Charis suggested. "It isn't the closest by miles, but it's probably the fastest to get to. Izak, what do you think?"

The fiend hadn't moved since we came into the room. He just stood with a stoic expression, holding his mutilated hand across his chest. When Charis asked his opinion, he nodded once.

"Okay," I said. "That's our move. Let's go."

We traveled back through the sewers, along the path I had last seen at a full run while trying to escape Abaddon. The sewers were a cold, dark, empty place, more so now because the demon's dark existence had destroyed every manner of life it had encountered. Even the rats hadn't been safe from him, and a sewer without rats was an especially creepy thing.

I noted the dashes of Gervais' age-old blood when we passed them, Izak guiding us back in the reverse of the trail I had followed only a few days earlier. It would have suited me much better if we could still draw blood from the archfiend. It reminded me of a line I had heard in a movie once. "If it bleeds, we can kill it," they had said. What if it didn't bleed?

We didn't take the same route all the way back. We were eighty percent of the way there when Izak pulled us to the right, along a much smaller and more damp corridor with an odor that could have dropped a skunk. A few minutes later, we were slashing through ankle-deep muck, the source of which I was afraid to ask.

"This is the way out?" I asked the demon. He didn't turn around, or make any other motion. Just a simple nod. "This is how Gervais used to go out?" Another nod.

"*He hasn't used these tunnels in years,* " Josette said. "*Why would he wander through filth now that he is Lord of the City?* " Her tone was sarcastic and mocking.

The stench-ridden passage finally ended at a ladder up to a covered exit. I took the lead, climbing the rungs and focusing to push the steel lid aside. I climbed out into a small alley, down which I could see the hum of Parisian urban life moving along at its normal flow. I bent down and held out my arm, taking Sarah's hand

as she reached the summit, and doing the same for Charis. I held out my hand for Izak too, but the demon ignored it, emerging from the sewer on his own.

"I won't miss that," Sarah said. Neither would I. With a thought, I willed the fetid air away and hit us with a clean, fresh blast.

"Which way from here?"

I pulled out my cell, ready to hit it up for directions. I didn't need to. Izak glamoured himself, morphing into a tourist-type in a polo shirt, khaki shorts, knee high socks and sneakers, and walked out onto the street. We hurried to keep up, matching his ridiculous garb.

I'd thought he knew where we were going, and would lead us to the train station. Instead, he reached the street and raised his good hand to his mouth, spreading his lips and blowing in a sharp whistle. We caught up just as the cab pulled up along the curb.

"Where to?" the driver asked. He was mortal. Harmless.

"We need to catch the train from Paris to London," I said. I started digging into my pants pockets, searching for funds or something I could pass as funds. Charis tapped me on the shoulder, holding up her own credit card.

"You want Eurostar?" the driver leaned over and pushed the passenger side door open.

"Yes." I didn't know if that's what it was called, but I assumed he did. I opened the door for Charis and Sarah, giving Izak shotgun. The driver eased out onto the street.

I kept my Sight focused as we drove, a radar in search of any Divine that might even consider trying to get in the way. When I didn't sense anything, I pushed the focus, extending my reach out at least a mile or two from our position. At first, I considered that we were just in a slow spot, but we were in one of the oldest cities around, a place where even the architecture oozed Divine essence. Still, the further we traveled from the sewer, north through the city, the more uncomfortable I began to feel. There was nothing. At all. It was as if every Divine living or stationed in Paris had vanished. Or fled. Or died? Maybe they had learned what was lurking in the sewers below their feet?

"There are no Divine here," I whispered, leaning over Sarah so Charis could hear.

"None?" She was surprised. I had thought maybe she had been doing the same exercise.

“No. I’ve been a lot of places, but I’ve never felt such quiet before.” Even in the Scottish Highlands there had been a Touched or a Turned keeping track of the locals, spreading the good works of God by tending to the homeless, or hustling them at cards.

“The Beast?”

It was possible. Gervais was the local archfiend, which meant he could have brought all of the nearby demons away from the city to wherever he wanted them. If the demons were gone, it made sense that angels would follow. But all of them?

“The calm before the storm,” Sarah said, barely loud enough to hear. The uncomfortable feeling sprouted into a darker foreboding.

We reached the Eurostar station without incident, and without any hint of Divine anywhere close by. Charis paid the driver, and for the tickets for each of us on a train that was leaving in the next half-hour. By the time we made our way from the ticket office down to the tracks, it was already boarding. Getting the first train out was a bit of luck, and I was thankful that just once today something had gone our way.

It was a smooth flow to our seats in Business Premier, two by two facing one another in the back of the car. I took up the aisle seat against the luggage closet so I could watch everything happening in the car. Izak sat across with Sarah, and his eyes stayed glued to the inter-car doors.

The quiet and ease of the departure should have helped us relax, but it only served to make us more tense. It had been too easy to get from the sewers of Paris to here. Too easy to escape from a location where the Beast *knew* we were going to be, headed for one he hopefully didn’t. Had he been *that* sure that Abaddon would capture Sarah, and either catch or kill the rest of us? Would he be *that* foolish, after we had fought our way out of his first trap? I didn’t like it, and looking around at the faces of my companions, I didn’t need to ask them to know they didn’t either.

The trip time from Paris to London was a little over two hours. We were fifteen minutes in when my cell began to ring. I pulled it from my pocket. Obi.

“What’s the good word?” I asked, picking up.

“Hey man,” Obi said. “We need to talk. Are you alone?” He sounded more tense than I felt. His voice had a minor quake that betrayed his nervousness.

“No, why?” I glanced around the seats again. Sarah was staring

out the window, Izak was watching the rear doors, and Charis mumbling to herself under her breath, talking to her demonic admirer.

"Get yourself alone," he said. "This news isn't good for mixed company." He lowered his voice. "It's about Izak."

I raised an eyebrow, looked at the demon, and stood up. Sarah turned her head and titled it questioningly.

"It's Obi," I said. "Nothing to worry about. I'm just going to take a walk while we chat." Sarah was satisfied, so I started walking down the aisle. "What's going on?"

Silence.

"Obi?"

Nothing.

"Obi?" I said it a little louder. I was near the opposite end of the car.

"He can't hear you." The statement came from my left. I turned my head, and felt my heart rate jump. The teenager with the blue mohawk was smiling at me. "Have a seat." He patted the empty seat next to him.

I considered shouting for help, or trying to run, or something. There was no point. He had known where we were the entire time. He had known we had gotten away. How long he had been waiting, watching, and following, I couldn't know. I sat down.

"Not Obi?" I asked.

He chuckled. "I'm a god, kid. Changing my voice and sending it over cell frequencies is something even you could do, if you'd ever thought to try."

Which I hadn't, but it might come in handy in the future. "So, why the sit-down? Decided to give up?"

I got a half-smile for that. "Truth be told, I came to gloat. You got the Box, but I've got its creator. Oh, and you already know about Abaddon. I am curious though. How did you get past him?"

"You came to gloat? Aren't gods above gloating?"

He leaned back in the seat. "I would say yes, but the thing is, I despise you. Always have. Any chance to rub salt in your wounds is a chance I'm going to take. Besides, you still see this thing as some kind of adventure or something, like you have a chance in Heaven or Hell of stopping me." He leaned forward, putting himself right in my face, and spoke with a quiet intensity. "I've told you before. You can't stop me, kid. My power's been growing faster than even I

expected. I guess I got a little more of that little nut's juice than I realized." A laugh. "How's she been anyway? I hear those types can be hard to handle, especially under pressure."

He wasn't just gloating, there was more to it. "She's fine," I said, returning a smile of my own. "Better than ever, if you have to know." I lowered my voice, mimicking his tone. "You think this is a done deal, that you've already won. Maybe you have Avriel, but I'm pretty sure we can manage without him. It may all be a game to you, and that's awesome. There's a reason the game gets played though. Just because you think you know who's going to win, there's always the chance of an upset."

His arrogant smile corroded, if only for an instant. Maybe he thought I didn't notice, but I had. For all his loud talk, the reason he was here wasn't because he wanted to tease me. It was because he was afraid. Afraid because we had gotten past Abaddon, and evaded him yet again. Afraid because we were proving to be more of a challenge than he had expected. Did he really even have Avriel captive? My lie-spotting power didn't work on him, so there was no way to know.

"Not today, kid," he said, regaining his composure. "Not today." He pushed back the sleeve of his suit jacket to take a look at his watch. "It's been nice chatting with you, but I'm afraid it's time for me to collect what is mine, and be on my way." He turned his head and leaned up, so he could see to the rear of the train. "And there she is. So cute in that hoodie. Maybe I'll stuff her, make her into a little trophy commemorating your abject failure. After I bleed her out, that is."

The Beast stood up, still looking back. I followed his gaze to the rear of Sarah's head, covered by the black hood of her sweatshirt.

"I don't want my prize getting hurt in the accident," he said. "I'll pick her up after the fun."

I don't know what he did to her then, but I could see her head stiffen, and Charis look up. Whatever was going on, it caused her to jump to her feet. She looked past Sarah then and saw the Beast standing there, that wicked smile on his meat puppet's face.

"Better try to find something to hold onto," the Beast said. "She's not the worst choice, but I don't think she'll soften the impact much. See you soon." The body went slack and collapsed. Dead.

I was still trying to make the connection between the Beast

sitting me down to talk and his foreshadowing of the train's impending doom when a bell began to ring from somewhere in the car, and a second later the change of the locomotive's momentum forced me to put a hand against the wall to stop my inequivalent deceleration. I glanced back to Charis, our eyes catching, and that's when it hit me. Stupid. I was so stupid.

I focused, throwing my Sight forward to the front of the train. We were in the fourth car, and there was nothing on the train. Past the train was another story. I nearly collapsed from the powerful heat that blasted my soul. The Beast was sly, and he'd duped me into useless banter while we'd sped headlong into his net.

Except the train was slowing, and the demonic assault group was too far away to force the train off its rails before we ground to a stop. I hadn't been the one to throw the emergency brake. Had Charis?

I dashed to the back of the train, ignoring the looks of the confused mortals who thought I was batty for even being out of my chair while the machine whined and shuddered to a stop. Reaching them, I saw the Beast had belted Sarah in tight.

"What's going on?" Charis asked.

"You didn't throw the emergency brake?"

"No!"

Someone had, but that would have to wait. "He was looking to crash the train," I said. "There's a serious ambush up ahead."

I grabbed the knife from behind Charis' back and focused, keeping my hand steady enough to slice through the straps of nylon that were holding Sarah in while the car vibrated and slowed.

"There's no way to escape it," Charis said. "We have to fight."

I could still See them up in front of the train, but they had started moving towards it. "Come on," I said. "We need to head them off, or they're going to rip all of these people apart."

I swung around, past the luggage racks to the train doors. It was trivial to push them open. Izak went first, jumping out and rolling to a stop. We were in the middle of farmland, so at least he had found some grass.

Sarah and Charis joined me at the doors. "I'll break our fall," she said. Izak would heal from any breaks or scrapes he had just suffered. Sarah wasn't so fortunate. I felt the pressure of Charis' power, and then she jumped from the train, floating parallel to the doors for an instant before they began to lose speed and lower

gently to the ground. I saw Izak running past them, surpassing the velocity of the train and catching up as I threw myself out.

I didn't want to waste energy breaking my fall, so I hit pretty hard. First came the smell of the grass, and then it dug into my mouth and nose when I face-planted into it. The nose broke, and I was sure I felt a tooth pop free, and then I was rolling and tumbling, getting bruised but not feeling the agony of any more breakage on my way to a stop. I was healing before Izak helped me up with his good hand.

"You okay to fight?" I asked him. He gave me the finger, and we both ran.

Somewhere between one running step and another, I starting shifting, and my sprint became an awkward bipedal hop, and then a smooth and fast four-legged sprint. Somewhere between the hop and the sprint, Izak had gotten his arms around my neck, and when I launched ahead at monster speed, he was along for the ride.

"*Hey Ullie* ," I said. "*Take the wheel.* "

The demon was hungry for the power, and he grabbed it without hesitation. Knowing he wouldn't use the opportunity against me made it easier to give it up to him, and giving it up made me a more effective force. I could concentrate on the Divine attack, while the Were took care of the physical.

"*Stop freakin' calling me Ullie* ," he growled, his finer control pushing us faster than I could manage. "*And tell Izak if he ever does this again I'm going to rip his throat out.* "

"*Like you could* ," I replied.

We blew past the front of the train, which had nearly stopped. The demon force was close enough to see now, a small army of the many-armed half-man, half-snake naga, a dozen trolls, an earth elemental, and a fallen angel Commanding them. It was the massive earth elemental that would have been the one to smash the train from its tracks, and the signal that there had to be a witch somewhere close. The rest had been brought in to keep us busy while the Beast picked up his prize. I didn't need to see the fallen angel's face, to see him smile, to know the Beast had taken over.

"The angel is the Beast," I growled to Izak through Ulnyx's toothy snout.

Our speed brought us yards closer in seconds, and now I could see his face. He wasn't smiling at all.

"Can you take the elemental?" I asked Izak.

He grunted and let go, hitting the ground on his feet and sliding impressively to a stop. The last thing I saw before pouncing onto a troll was the demon conjuring a sword of hellfire into his good hand. Heaven and Hell had good reason to worry about him.

The troll toppled to the ground under our weight, and before I knew it I had a huge chunk of it's throat in my jaws. We spat it out and dove away, just in time to avoid being crushed under a second troll's heavy iron mace. Ulnyx pounced on that one too, and I used my Sight to track a third about to flatten us. I focused on the mace handle, corroding and rusting the iron thousands of years in an instant.

We'd dropped two more of the trolls and were in the thick of it with the rest by the time Charis and Sarah reached us. Charis had Callus' sword in hand, and she charged towards the naga. They had more arms and more swords, but they couldn't make up for her speed and focus. Pebbles from the ground swirled tightly around her as she twisted into the reptilian mass. Most of them bounced harmlessly off the naga's scaly skin, but enough found their eyes, giving her the split-second she needed to break their defenses and put the blessed blade into their hearts.

I heard Sarah's voice shout out, and one of the demons turned on the others. It didn't survive long, but as soon as it had fallen, she Commanded another to take its place.

"*Ulnyx, get the angel* ," I said. I had expected that once Sarah arrived the Beast would make to salvage the mess that had been made of his plan. We were fortunate that he was limited to the physical prowess offered by his host, but we were way too far away, the battle with the trolls pulling us across the farmland.

I needn't have worried.

I hadn't seen him do it, but somehow Izak had toppled the earth elemental and set it to melting, as he had with the monster at the airport. He'd already started moving towards Sarah, and he cut the fallen angel off on the way. There was a flash of heat as the Beast lashed out with cursed metal against the demon's blade of hellfire, and then the hellfire was gone and Izak was on the ground.

"*Ulnyx* !"

The Were finished ripping the throat from a troll, using its falling body as an anchor to spring from. Powerful legs coiled and launched, and we were off. The Beast was quickly approaching Sarah, his host running full speed towards her. She was

concentrating too hard on controlling the naga, and didn't see him coming.

Charis did, and she broke off her attack, leaping back away from the demons and putting herself in front of Sarah, Callus' blade over her head, ready to attack or defend. Sarah saw what was happening now, her brow creasing while two of the naga slithered over and launched their assault against the Beast. He skewered them without slowing.

We pounded the grass, the Were stepping easily over Izak, still sprawled on the ground. We were closing the gap in record time, but the gap to Sarah was closing just as fast. Dark wings unfurled then, pushing through the black linen shirt the fallen angel was wearing, spreading wide into the air.

"No," I shouted. Charis was still standing between the Beast and Sarah, and she didn't disappoint. Her sword was a blur, whipping around, meeting his. The contact rang out across the countryside, then again, and again. She had gotten between them and put up a wall, slowing the Beast's assault.

It wasn't enough.

Charis swung her blade again, and the Beast caught it. He caught it with the angel's bare hand, the metal digging deep into the flesh. In an instant, it had disintegrated to nothing, the power running down the weapon's length and causing Charis to drop it with a cry of pain. A follow-up blow, and Charis tumbled away.

Ulnyx's leap was strong and true. The Beast was only yards away, Sarah a few yards further ahead. We would get to him before he got to her.

At the last possible moment, he turned, bringing the sword up and lashing into us, the blade ripping through flesh and bone and muscle, the force nearly splitting us in half and throwing us away. We landed and slid, the grass finding its way up into our nose again. The pain was intense, but I didn't care. It would heal. There was no one between Sarah and the Beast now. And he knew it.

He threw his sword away and approached her at a walk. She kept her eyes fixed to his, and stood still.

"Well, my dear," he said. "You're full of surprises. I had thought you'd be too much of an emotional wreck to have any kind of grip on reality, but here you are an effective member of Team D." He shot a look over at me, laying in the grass waiting for my body to be whole enough to rise. "This whole thing has been buckets of fun,

but it's time you came with me, and fulfilled your destiny."

"No." A Command.

The Beast laughed. "You can't Command me. Why would you ever think you could?"

Sarah's eyes narrowed, her entire demeanor tight with intensity. "I don't need to Command you, asshole," she said. "Just your meat."

The Beast's eyes widened, and he tried to reach out and grab her. Every muscle moved in slow-motion, the possessed Divine's body caught in the middle of the opposing forces.

"Keep trying," Sarah said. "You aren't strong enough."

The Beast growled in frustration. "Don't be too certain," he said.

I wasn't too certain. Neither was Charis. She came up behind him and removed his head with a clean easy stroke of the cursed sword. The fallen angel dropped in two pieces, and both began to dissolve. The Beast had left the building.

I took my body back from Ulnyx and pushed myself upright. The hit had nearly severed my leg, but it had already made itself right again. I started running towards Sarah and Charis when I remembered the witch. Earth elementals weren't from Hell. They were created here. I sought her out with my Sight, feeling for the heat of her dark core. With their leader dead, the few surviving demons had begun to flee. She must have gone with them, because I couldn't pick her out.

"Well, that sucked," I said, reaching Charis and Sarah on the field. Izak joined us a few seconds later, none the worse for wear.

"I did it," Sarah said in a happy, singsong voice. "I really did it. We won!"

"Yeah, you did it." I gave her a hug, letting her enjoy her small victory. I wasn't going to tell her about the chill I was feeling. The dread of knowing the Beast was getting much stronger, much faster than even he had expected. The truth that she had taken him by surprise, and even then her Command had only slowed him. If Charis hadn't been there, she would be gone already.

We'd won the first three rounds because we'd been lucky. The Beast knew how to fight angels, and I knew from experience how predictable they could be. He was still learning how to fight us unpredictable, volatile, humans, and I had a feeling he was a fast learner.

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We were back on the train. Shortly after re-embarking, the conductor had made an announcement that someone had pulled the emergency brake, but it had been a false alarm, and the culprit couldn't be found. We'd continue on to London as planned, though we would be fifteen minutes late. The convenience of it confounded me, and occupied my thoughts while we skated along.

Someone was helping us, but who? My first thought was of Max, but if he was in communication with the Beast it would have been hard for him to sneak unnoticed onto the train. Even if he had, and had just shown his true colors, why not hook up with us now? In any case, I would have Seen him. It had to be someone who could avoid detection. Maybe even a mortal? There had to be someone else with something to gain, who knew about the Beast, and had stuck their needle into just the right spot. I was grateful for them, but I would have felt better to be able to thank them in person.

We had settled back in to our original seats. Izak looked dour, surely unused to being tossed aside with as little effort as the Beast seemed to have needed. He wouldn't have taken the excuse, but I

knew it was at least in part due to the loss of his hand. When he had met up with us outside the train, Sarah had hugged him with the jubilance of a groupie at a rock concert, but he had just stared straight ahead, unspeaking in words, gesture, or emotion. Sarah was too high to even notice, but I had, and Izak's worry was enough to put me even more on guard.

She was still smiling, the hood of her sweatshirt around her neck, her face almost glowing from her excitement. She had changed so much since we had been reunited with Josette. It was hard to resist the naive voice in my head that was telling me what Father Tom had said wasn't true, that it didn't have to be that way. I had listened to the naive voice for too long though, and it had never led me in a good direction.

Josette. She had been almost silent since I had woken up. Her presence was a constant familiar companion, and she had never been as outspoken as Ulnyx, but I knew there was something more to it.

"*Josette* ." I called out to her.

"*Yes, Landon.* " She responded right away.

"*Is everything okay?* "

She took more time to answer. "*If I tell you it is, I think you'll know I'm lying.* "

"*Sarah?* " It wasn't a lucky guess. I knew we would have to have this conversation, but I had expected I would be the one to initiate it.

"*I can feel what you feel. I can hear your thoughts. They are mumbles and whispers, and I don't understand them all, but I understand enough.* "

"*You didn't know?* "

She sighed, the action echoing in my soul. "*I've always known. Every angel knows, whether it is something they ever think about or not. What angel falls in love with a demon, after all? Yet, there she sits, and look at how beautiful she is. It doesn't matter how she came to be. She still is.* "

I glanced up at Sarah. She was looking out the window now, watching the countryside, but I could still see the edge of her smile.

"*I love her unconditionally. Yet, I know there can only be one true end for her. I had hoped to save her. I had hoped Izak could save her. A demon, a favorite of Lucifer himself, his heart softened and molded by love. I forgive her for releasing the Beast, but her complicity has shown*

me that Izak was not enough. Even you were not enough, and I can never be enough. The madness is in her, and there is no way to get it out. "

"*She told me that she has seen herself killing me, and Charis. That it's the future she felt will come to pass, and she was terrified of it. Looking at her now, I can't believe it is the future she's still seeing.* " Except, what if it was? How was there any way to know her mind, when it was shifting like a sand dune?

There was a long silence. It sat uncomfortably, but I knew Josette well enough to know what it meant. She was deciding how to say something she didn't want to have to say.

"*I believe it is the future that will come to pass, if you let it.* "

"*You mean I'll have to stop her?* "

"*Yes.* "

I glanced over at Sarah again, trying to picture myself pushing a knife into her chest, or taking her head in the Were's massive paws and snapping her neck. I had to fight against the tears that threatened to fall.

"*How can I live with that?* " I asked. "*How can you? How could we together, and have you never resent me for doing it?* "

Another long silence. "*I don't know,* " she said at last.

Three words were never harder to hear. Josette had always trusted in God, and had always pointed to His will and plan whenever I questioned the path we had to walk. She had even invoked His name the last time the thought of killing Sarah had entered the conversation. Had meeting her daughter eroded her faith? Or had her love of something tangible and real, a part of her, a mother's love, grown stronger than her love for her Lord?

"*What if killing her was a kindness?* " I asked. It was something I had thought about at length. I had seen the way Gervais had broken her, just by his very presence. I had been inside of her soul, and witnessed the way she battled herself. Given a choice, would she really want to live that way?

"*Landon, I don't know.* " Her voice was soft and sad.

I didn't know if I could do it, either. Even as a kindness. I knew Charis could. She didn't have the connection to Sarah I did, even sharing my memories of her. I wanted more than anything for that to be good enough, but I had my own feelings getting in the way and turning the equation back on itself. Could I watch Charis kill her, and forgive her for it? Could I love her then?

The word came unbidden to my mind. Love? I snuck a glance over at her, leaned back in her seat, staring at the ceiling. My heart jumped just to look at her.

"What?" she asked, her eyes staying focused on the soft gray plastic above. She hadn't needed to see me, to know I was looking at her.

"Nothing," I said unconvincingly.

There was no doubt she had feelings for me too, but did they stretch as far into the horizon as my own? It seemed too soon, too fast for such a thought, but I knew everything about her, and she knew everything about me. There had been a connection since the first time I had set eyes on her, though at the time I couldn't begin to guess what it was. I had just thought she was insanely attractive. Now she was attractive, intelligent, cunning, loyal, smart… I could just keep rolling the adjectives all day. Which brought me back to love.

I had never been in love before. I thought I had cared for Rebecca, and a part of me did, but it wasn't love. More of an infatuation, with an unhealthy dose of lust thrown in. She was gorgeous, and dangerous, and she had been interested in me. Me? A washout ex-con security guard who couldn't be trusted with anything beyond old cups. She had saved my life when I had no idea what I was doing. I had an appreciation for what she gave me, but I knew now it wasn't love.

Charis had stayed behind to try to save me, and risked the entire future of the world to do it. I realized that if I were in her shoes, I would do the same thing. Seeing the world destroyed before letting someone be killed? If there wasn't some manner of love in there, I was hopeless.

"Seriously, Landon," Charis said. She turned her head now to look at me. "What?"

It must have been my expression. Her face turned red, and she smiled.

"You still owe me."

That was all she said.

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“I should have known the rift would be in the Tower of London.” I held the cab door open while Sarah and Charis slid into the back seat.

We had arrived in London without incident, and I had decided not to say anything to Charis about the feelings that had been percolating during the trip. After all, they had spent the remainder of the ride sparring with my agony over Sarah’s potential future and the fear of what one of us might have to do. Swimming in that soup, there was just no way to be sure what my true emotions were for anyone, and I wasn’t about to go spouting such a powerful word to someone unless I was completely sure I meant it, and could back it up full-time. Besides, we both knew there was something there. Words could wait.

“Under the White Tower, to be specific,” Charis confirmed. “There’s a basement, under the basement.”

“Of course there is.” I lowered my voice, so Izak wouldn’t hear. “How many demons can create their own rifts?”

“Very few on Earth. Maybe a dozen of the most powerful

archfiends? Which is why most of the circles are tucked away in old places." She whispered back, and I hoped Izak either couldn't hear, or wasn't paying attention. I had no doubt the loss of his hand was painful in more ways than one, whether he would ever show it or not. "I made the rift in Thailand, with Vilya's help, but it took me nearly a week. Reyzl knew the secrets, but even he would be hard-pressed to draw one from scratch in less than a day or two. Izak's skill was amazing."

And now it was lost, at least temporarily. I expected if we survived, he would learn to do it with his other hand.

I focused on my Sight, pushing it out around us. I found some bit of comfort in catching the familiar waves of heat and coolness that reflected the Divine factions of the city. A vampire here, a Touched there. It seemed the Beast's war hadn't made it here yet, but I didn't expect it to last. He knew we were headed here, and I was sure he wasn't happy.

"Oy, Tower of London." The cabbie's shout broke me away from my thought.

I looked out the window. We were stopped in front of the main tourist entrance to the landmark. "Do you know who put it there?" I asked Charis.

"The rift? No. Maybe it was Izak."

The demon heard that, and he shook his head, then tapped it. He hadn't done it, but he knew who did.

Charis paid the driver, and we exited the cab. We all approached the tourist gate together. Sometimes, the most straightforward route was the best one. Charis paid for our entry, and four American tourists shuffled onto the grounds.

I focused on my Sight again, and cast my eyes out towards a throng of visitors. At the same time, one of them turned their head and focused on me.

Charis noticed an instant later. "Do you know him?" she asked.

"*I don't know him,* " Josette said.

"No. I should go introduce myself."

We met halfway, the angel and me. He was tall, and strikingly handsome. His hair was cut short around a model's angled face, his polo and jeans hugging tight to his lean, muscled form. He hadn't hesitated to approach when he caught wind of me, and that told me a lot. Especially considering the company I was keeping.

"Diuscrucis," he said, putting a slight flourish in his bow. "My

name is Adam."

"Not *the* Adam?" I asked. I had already met Mephistopheles, so I couldn't be too sure.

He laughed. "No. I was named after the first mortal." He looked over my shoulder to where the others waited. "Quite a crew of miscasts and misfits you've assembled."

"Desperate times," I replied. "Did you know I would be here, or is it just your lucky day?"

"All of Heaven knows you're here. We got a tip from one of our Touched that you were on the Eurostar, bound for London."

Except there hadn't been any Touched on the Eurostar. "If that's what you want to believe. You have to know I won't attack you."

"We do. Which is why we haven't assembled in force. In fact, it was decided that we should pass your whereabouts over to the Inquisitors. They're quite eager to catch up to you, and not bound as tightly to our laws."

I looked up, half-expecting Kassie to land on my head.

"I was charged with delivering the message to Kassie," Adam said. He started laughing. "I understand she's in New York, chasing after you."

Interesting. "So, what are you doing here, instead of there?"

"The Beast."

I could have laughed myself. "You believe?"

He shrugged. "I was there when they brought Melody in. She's pretty raw, but she's a spunky one, and I believe in her faith. She was insistent that the Beast was real, that it was free, and that we needed to leave you alone because you're the only one who can stop it." His eyes searched me. They were looking for acknowledgement that what Melody had said was true.

"Do you believe her?"

"I don't not believe her," he said. "Which is why I'm here. I'd like to tag along with your motley crew."

"*A spy for the Inquisitors?* " I asked, sending the thought along to Josette.

"*It is possible* ," she replied.

"*Even better.* "

I turned my attention back to the seraph.

"What about delivering your message?"

"I promised that I would deliver it," he said. "I didn't say when."

Now I did laugh. The games of angels were always worth it.

“You’re okay with going through a rift?”

That was my test for him, to see how serious he was about following. Angels weren’t forbidden from traveling the rifts, but they hated it.

“The idea doesn’t please me, but I will do what I must. If what Melody says is the truth, she will need allies to convince the others.” His face was serious and he put his hand out, resting it on my shoulder. “Whatever you think about Heaven, diuscrucis, not all of us are so wrapped up in laws that we cannot see the storm for the clouds. Even Inquisitors.”

His openness was unexpected, but refreshing. “So you are an Inquisitor?”

“Yes. I was up until recently referred to as a ‘Tenth’. There are nine active Inquisitors at any one time, and many of us who wait to serve in that role. I became Ninth when Callus was killed. I was still being briefed when Melody was brought in, which is why I’m not with Kassie now.”

“I didn’t do that,” I said. “The Beast did.”

He removed his hand, and cast his eyes back to where the others waited again. “We shall see. She carries his sword.”

“Desperate times,” I said again. “I’m sure she’ll trade with you, if you’d like. Anyway, I don’t have your Blade. Charis did, but we lost it to the Beast. Sticking with us is probably your best chance at getting it back, and if you don’t… it won’t matter, because the Beast will be running the show.”

“So you’re saying I can join you?”

“Welcome aboard,” I replied, holding out my hand. There was only a small hesitation before he took it and shook. “Whatever you think about me and my crew, Adam, we aren’t against Heaven or Hell. We’re for the billions of mortals that have populated this world, and who deserve to survive and thrive here regardless of what your master, or the other wants. The Beast, though… the Beast doesn’t care about any of us. He wants to see all of us enslaved or destroyed. He doesn’t have a side other than his own, and he has a lot of followers, both angelic and demonic. I need you to think about that, because you may need to fight and kill someone you thought you knew, before this is over.” I saw an image of Rachel in my mind, slumped in her chair. I let the wave of sadness wash over me. “I have.”

His look was that of startled fear, but he gave me a short nod.

“Let me introduce you to the club,” I said, leading him back to where they waited. “Everybody, this is Adam. He’s an Inquisitor. He asked to come along so we can prove the Beast is real.”

I looked at Adam. His eyes were fixed on Izak’s mangled hand. “I’ve heard you travel with the demon Mephistopheles.” He turned to me, his startled fear enlarged to full-blown. “Whatever did this to him, I fear you won’t have to work very hard to prove it.”

Izak glared at him while Charis shook his hand. When Sarah approached, I could see the flush of her face, and smell the pheromones.

“I’m Sarah,” she said, her voice shaky.

“A true diuscrucis,” Adam said, giving her the same bow he had given me. “It’s an honor.”

I knew he was lying. She probably would have too, but she was too busy being a teenage girl in the face of an adonis. “Thank you,” she squeaked.

“Adam,” Charis said, unslinging Callus’ blade. “I took this from your brethren’s corpse in order to defend myself. I’d be happy to swap with you.”

Adam seemed surprised. “Return it to me when you no longer need to defend yourself from the Beast,” he said. He scored a lot of points for that one.

We made our way up into the White Tower with the other tourists. While we wasted a little too much time plodding ahead as part of the larger group, I considered what Adam had said. The Beast had told the angels where I was going. Why? What could he hope to gain by having them descend on us en masse, unless a decent number of them were sure to be servants, and he could possess one and snatch Sarah during the ensuing chaos? That was the point where my brain stuck. How many of God’s army were even fighting for Him? Or maybe the Beast had known they would pass the buck to the Inquisitors, and they were the ones who were on his side?

I watched Adam walk alongside Charis. Had I taken him in too easily? Who was it that said to keep your friends close, and your enemies closer? Except, Callus hadn’t been a servant, so there were holes in that theory too. Too many balls, again. There was nothing to do but go forward and hope for the best.

“He’s so handsome,” Sarah whispered.

It was undeniable. He was. So much so that even Sarah could

See it. I didn't completely understand how she viewed the world, but it seemed to reflect pretty accurately. "If he didn't think we were useful, he'd be more than happy to stick that sword of his into your chest," I said. It was cold, but the last thing I needed was for Sarah to be hung up on a crush.

"So you say, but Melody likes Obi."

Ugh.

We broke off from the main tour when we hit the basement, following Charis to what the mortals probably saw as an unbroken part of the stone floor. What I saw was a block of cement with a loop of iron driven into it.

"Down here, I assume?" I said.

"Yep." Charis put her hand on the ring, and lifted the cement like it was made of foam.

Adam took it from her, and held it open. "Ladies first."

Charis gave him a polite smile and moved to the opening, mounting a wooden ladder down. When she saw me looking at her, she rolled her eyes. I held back the tempting smirk, and ushered Sarah to the ladder.

"Thanks, Adam," Sarah said as she started climbing.

"Of course, my lady," he replied. Who was this guy?

Izak went down after Sarah, and I followed behind him. We all waited at the bottom while Adam maneuvered himself onto the ladder while holding up the stone door. It was an impressive feat of strength for a seraph.

One he reached the bottom, we approached the rift. It was older than many I had seen and been through, a ring of hewn stones with the runes etched along them, drawn on all sides of the rock.

"So, where in Egypt is this going to land us?" Sarah asked.

"You're going to love this," Charis said.

"Where?" she repeated.

Izak leaned in, using his good hand to draw new connecting runes, the master key.

I had Charis' memories, so I knew the answer. "Cairo. The Museum of Egyptian Antiquities. They have a rift there that they pulled out of one of the tombs. They have no idea what it is, but they took it apart and put it back together with perfect precision. They've never told anyone about it, because the writing is clearly not hieroglyphic."

"The Egyptians had rifts?" Sarah asked.

“Remember, child, our kind predates the mortals by many millennia,” Adam said, “and the differences between what your historians believe and what is the truth can at times be pretty stark.”

“You’re saying the Egyptians weren’t pagans?” I asked.

Adam shrugged. “I’m saying that they were worshipping the same God, though their understanding was not as complete as it is today. They saw different faces of the same surface. They also idolized those who were Awake, much unlike today’s societies.”

“Hold on,” I said. “Pharaohs… Divine?”

He laughed. “Didn’t you kill Reyzl? They weren’t all Divine, but they always had our attention. I suppose the pyramids didn’t hurt. I wish I had been around to see them when they were still covered in limestone.”

Izak grunted, and I felt his power flare and feed into the stones. The rift was ready.

“Ladies first,” Adam said again.

“Not this time,” I said. “We don’t know what’s on the other side, and Sarah’s too important to send through first.”

“In that case, I’ll go,” he replied, and he did.

“Izak?”

The demon nodded and stepped into the rift.

“You don’t like him, do you?” Sarah asked. She seemed disappointed. Or maybe that was because he had called her ‘child’?

“I don’t trust him. You shouldn’t either.” I motioned for both of them to wait, until Izak reappeared and gave us the thumbs up.

Stepping through the rift, we found ourselves in a massive underground warehouse lit by a million fluorescent lights. The smell of burning plastic lingered in the air, and looking down I saw that activating the circle had caused the wrapping the archaeologists had put over it to burn away. I was relieved that for once we had managed to travel without landing in the thick of it. Then I noticed the fire alarm was going off.

“We should go,” Charis said. “Divine Suggestion won’t keep these people away if they feel their heritage is threatened.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I peeked out from beyond the large crates placed on either side of the rift, looking down a long aisle filled with crates, boxes, and shelves. It was amazing to think of how much stuff they didn’t have on display. There was shouting now, coming from the right. At least know we knew where the exit

was.

"Adam, can you get us some bearings?" I figured if we had an angel with us, we might as well take advantage.

Adam responded by reaching up and pulling off his polo shirt, revealing the perfectly chiseled form underneath. He handed me the shirt stepped past, finding a spot where he could extend his wings. I dared a glance over at Sarah, unsurprised at her red face and O-shaped mouth.

He flew up near the ceiling, his wings flapping slowly and gracefully. I had never seen an angel in regular flight before. They were usually diving down at me, or in the midst of landing. It was an awe-inspiring sight, and I was impressed with the lift he got with so little effort. Of course, he wasn't really flying in the sense of air and thermals and lift. He had a little help with his ratios.

"The exit is that way," he called down, pointing. "There are about a dozen mortals a few rows away, and they're running towards you. They must know where the alarm was triggered."

There was no time to get around them, and no time to hide and wait for them to investigate why the rift's packaging had melted. I was hesitant to ask Sarah to handle them, because she'd been using that particular skill quite a bit, and I had a fear that every time she did it moved her closer to the madness. We needed another way out.

"I'll lead them away," I said. "I'll meet you at the exit."

I didn't wait for them to argue. I started running down the aisle, glamouring myself into my vision of a ninja. I figured that would look espionage enough to get their attention.

It did. They turned the corner as a group, a clutch of Egyptians with fire extinguishers in hand. These weren't soldiers, these were scientists. When they saw me, they skidded to a stop. Then one of the guys in front shot his fire extinguisher at me.

I danced out of the path of the white foam, and then turned ran past them, trying to lead them down a different aisle, hoping they would all follow, and wondering if Divine Suggestion, as Charis had named it, could be used to attract them, especially since they saw me as the threat.

Apparently, it could, because when I turned my head to look back, I had twelve angry Egyptians right behind me. I could only imagine Adam's perspective. He would probably fall to the ground from laughing too hard.

I didn't focus on speeding myself up, though I could have outpaced the men easily. That wasn't the idea, and so I ran slow, staying just out of reach of the fire extinguishers, and letting them feel like they could catch me. I looked up at Adam, and he was indeed laughing, but he had enough wherewithal to give me a thumbs up.

I'd only just turned down the second aisle when I saw Adam put both his thumbs up, and then wave for me to join them at the exit. I returned his gesture, and reached for my power so I could outrun them at last. He swooped down to join the others.

"Landon."

One of the men had just said my name. It broke my focus, and I stopped running.

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I didn't turn around right away. I stood there, taking in the sounds and the smells. There was one that was overpowering. Death.

"How did you find us?" I asked.

I turned slowly, knowing what I was going to find, even if I didn't know how it had happened. When I finished the half-circle, I saw that there was only one Egyptian left standing, a younger man with a thick mustache and an athletic build. The others were on the ground behind him.

"How many times do I have to explain this? I'm a god, Landon. I don't need to 'find' you. I always know where you are."

Was that how he had found us on the train? Then why hadn't he attacked us in New York? I had an idea that maybe being inside a church had something to do with that.

"You didn't have to kill them," I said.

He cackled with laugher. "Didn't have to kill them? That's what I do, you moron." He took a few steps back, and kicked one of the bodies. "So fragile, humans. So easy to break."

His anger was enough to change the pressure in the air. I could

feel it coming off his host like a static charge.

"Not feeling as confident, are you?" I asked. "Not after we've slipped past you and yours, what? Three times now? It's happened so often, I'm losing count. Some god."

This only enraged him more, but I wasn't that concerned. Sarah Commanding his host had shown he was limited when he was possessing another's consciousness. I probably shouldn't have been goading him, but I had my own share of anger.

"What are you doing here anyway?" I asked.

"I was curious."

"Curious?"

He took a few steps forward. "What would you be doing in Egypt? Something brought you here."

"You think I'm just going to tell you?"

He chuckled. "I know you aren't going to tell me," he said. "That's why I had to come and see for myself. I just couldn't resist revealing myself to you. I wanted you to know that I'm here. That I'm always here. And I can be anyone. Oh, and I'm not limited to only being here. Right now, I'm also in the body of a fiend in Mumbai."

"Mumbai?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what I'm doing in Mumbai, if you tell me what you're doing here," he said.

"I have an idea of what you're doing in Mumbai," I said. He was the Beast, after all. "You can't say the same about me."

"True enough, kid. I guess I'll have to settle for a different kind of satisfaction. I'll admit, you're pretty good at this game, for a rookie. You've managed pretty well, and I applaud you for that." He started clapping. "Like I told you before, my power is growing faster than even I expected. So, I'm moving up the time table on phase two. If you think it's been fun so far, you ain't seen nothing yet."

His face changed, growing into that freaking smile. That damnable grin that I despised.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

I focused, preparing myself for whatever he intended. "Bring it on."

He raised up his right hand, and I watched in horror as the bone of the forearm pushed out through the skin, growing and changing shape until it resembled a blade of bone, leaving the man's hand

hanging limply attached below it. His other arm went through the same transformation

“This is just a preview, kid.” He said. Then he charged.

There was no time to shift, but at least I had Josette’s fighting prowess to rely on. I focused, pouring power into my body, sidestepping the first attack and countering with a solid right hook. The Beast brought a forearm up to block it, and I heard the bones crumble beneath the force.

“Ouch,” he said, without emotion. He brought the right bone-blade around, slashing at my face. I caught his arm and held it.

“Do you really think you can take me like this?” I asked.

“Don’t be stupid, kid,” he replied. “That’s not what it’s about.”

I shoved him backward, sending him twenty feet in the air to crash down on the rest of the dead. He pushed himself to his knees, facing me.

“Watch this,” he said. He stabbed one of the bodies with the bone-blade. A second later, it began to climb to its feet. “Are you starting to get it?”

I felt my heart start to pound, my mind starting to catch up to the Beast’s display. He could re-animate the dead. How many at one time? I didn’t know, but Malize had said the angels sent entire armies up against him, armies that fell to their once fallen brethren. He could also possess the living. It was a vicious combo that brought all of the hope I’d started to gain from his prior defeats to a screeching halt. How could anyone stand up to that?

“Ah,” he said. “I see you are. I-“

His head fell forward, detached from his body. Adam stood behind him. “Okay,” he said. “I believe you.”

Was it a surprise the statement didn’t bring me any comfort? I motioned to the man he had animated. “What about him?”

In response, a grenade of hellfire hit the corpse, setting it on fire. Adam backed away from it, and in a few moments it was consumed. Izak stood there, a grim look on his face. He might not have been happy, but watching the body burn gave me back a little bit of my lost hope. At least we could burn the dead, to keep them from coming back.

The three of us ran through the warehouse, meeting up with Sarah and Charis near the exit.

“We need to move fast. The Beast-“

Another Egyptian man rounded the corner and leaped at Sarah.

Before I could react, Izak got in front of her and grabbed his head in his good hand. It burned away beneath his touch, the body flopping to the floor.

"He's possessing people and sending them at us," I finished.

"Come on," Charis said. "The Pyramids are ten miles away."

That wasn't that close. Not when we had to get through a city of hundreds of thousands of people, and any one or more of them could be the Beast.

We ran as fast as we could, up a flight of stairs and out the back door of the museum through an emergency exit. We had to keep going, to keep moving faster than the Beast could get people after us. Even if we killed them with fire like Izak had, he was still destroying people. People with families, and homes, and lives of their own.

"We need a car," Sarah said.

We had come out the back. There was a fence, and a roadway on the other side. I focused, tearing open the fence with a thought and running for the road.

As we approached, a car skidded off the pavement, headed straight for me, the driver laughing. I crouched and focused, ducking to the side and lifting the front corner of the car with a tug, sending it corkscrewing away to land upside down with a crash. A second later, two more cars veered towards me.

"Stay close to Sarah," I shouted. Not to protect her, but because she could protect us, at least from the cars. He wasn't going to risk killing his prize. They skidded to a stop, and the drivers got out.

They didn't get far. Izak hit them with hellfire, sending them falling away, but more cars were pulling over, and then I felt the sudden heat of a demon in my Sight.

"Get in the car," I yelled, pointing at one of the abandoned vehicles.

"I'll meet you there," Adam said. He spread his wings and shot into the air, circling above us.

The rest of us made a beeline for the car, some run-down rust bucket of a thing. Charis slid in behind the wheel, and I took shotgun. She peeled out as best she could in the clunker.

"Which way?" she asked me. I dug into my pocket and pulled out my cell. I never thought I'd be Googling directions to the Great Pyramids like this.

"Left," I said, looking at the map that had come up. I was still

waiting for the GPS to locate us, so I hoped that it was right.

"I can't go left from here," she shouted. "It's one-way."

I looked at her. "Are you kidding me?"

She smiled and turned the wheel, forcing the tires to whine while she pulled the car left, up a curb, and over into oncoming traffic. They split around us, avoiding an unseen obstacle. That didn't save them from the Beast, who was moving those he possessed behind us. We could hear the crashes in the background.

"Son of a bitch," I yelled.

We passed more cars, and I heard the screaming tires as the Beast took the drivers and turned the cars around, angling them into other oncoming traffic. Within seconds, the cars ahead of us saw what was happening behind us, and they came to a stop.

"Not good," Sarah said.

Charis hit the brakes. "Now what?"

I tried to think. This had gone bad faster than I could have imagined. I had thought the Beast would adapt his strategy, and he had in a big way.

"We'll have to fight our way through." I opened the door and got out of the car. They followed my lead.

"Do you give up?" Three of the drivers were walking towards us. The words came from all of their mouths at once.

"Not a chance," I said. As much as I hated that people were dying, if he won, *everything* would die. "You're going to have to do better."

Three faces smiling in unison. "Oh, I plan to. This is just the warmup."

"Izak?"

The demon walked towards the drivers.

"Nice hand," they said. "That looks like it hurts."

He held out his palm, the hellfire flaring in it. He bathed them in it.

"Good for you." Two more people approached from the other side, another man and a woman. "You can keep me from bringing them back, but you can't stop me from taking them, and there are quite a few people here in Cairo."

"Landon," Charis said. "This isn't going to work."

"We don't have a choice." I took Sarah's hand. "Be careful with your puppets," I said. "You don't want anything to happen to Sarah."

“Don’t worry. I’ll be careful.”

I let go of Sarah’s hand and ducked as a vampire crashed to the ground in front of me. I had Seen him coming. He rolled to his feet.

“It isn’t just humans, you know,” the vampire said.

Maybe not, but vampires could still burn.

Or lose their heads. When he leaped at me again, Charis intervened.

“Turn right onto Nile Corniche in two hundred meters,” came the automaton voice from my phone. It had finally gotten the directions.

“Come on,” I said. “We have to run for it. Now!”

I reached out for Sarah’s hand, and then paused, feeling a coolness enter my Sight, and hearing a buzzing in the distance. It seemed ridiculous, but what about the rest of the situation was any more sane?

“Sarah, when I say the word, grab onto me as tight as you can.”

“Okay, but why?”

“You’ll see. Also, tell Izak to get back over here.”

She nodded, and I could feel her power reaching out to the demon.

“Getting defensive?” the Beast asked. He was moving his pawns in closer. Ten more doors opened, and ten more drivers got out. “I can do this all day,” all twelve of him said.

The buzzing was getting louder. We just needed to hold them off for another minute. “Charis, the glass.”

She looked at me, and then focused. There was shattered glass from the crashed cars all over the road. She brought it to us, and started spinning it around.

“That isn’t going to work,” the Beast said. A dozen voices laughed in unison. He sent them forward, into the maelstrom. Some of the bodies were torn up, but one would block the onslaught from another, and half of them made it through. The buzzing was much louder now.

Izak turned on those that had gotten through the barrier, burning them with hellfire and putting his palm to their heads. They didn’t last long, but already a dozen more people were headed towards us.

“Landon?” Charis asked.

I turned my head and looked up.

“Charis, grab Izak,” I shouted. “Sarah, hang on.”

Charis reached out and took the demon by the arm. Sarah jumped on my back and wrapped her arms around my neck. The buzzing was clear now, easy to identify as an airplane propeller. I watched the plane swooping in, coming down towards us, ready to snatch us up like one of Tolkien's giant eagles.

The only difference was, we'd have to grab on ourselves.

I focused, flexing my legs and preparing to jump, hoping both Charis and I would get the timing right. I could see Adam now, inside the cockpit, his brow arched in concentration. Who knew an angel could fly a plane?

"Hey Ross," I said looking at the incoming puppets. Their eyes fixed on me, and I gave them the finger. Then I jumped.

"*Hah. Now this is what I call awesome* ," Ulnyx cried, his excitement rattling my soul.

Sarah screamed, and her arms gripped tighter around my neck, threatening to choke me. The plane rocked from side to side as I wrapped my arms around the left landing gear, swinging wildly back and forth while my body absorbed the shock, praying Sarah would hold on. I looked over and saw that Charis had made it, having wrapped one arm around the right gear, and helping Izak find purchase with the other. Satisfied, and greatly impressed with Adam, I peered back towards the roadway. At least one hundred pairs of possessed eyes followed the plane as it zipped away.

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We hung there, the four of us, from the landing gear of the small airplane that Adam had commandeered from I don't know where. It was less than ten miles to the Pyramids from the air, and the distance fell away fast. We had climbed up over the wheels by the time Adam circled the plane and brought it down in the sand next to the Great Pyramid.

There was no time to waste though. No time to congratulate the angel on his daring rescue, or even to just be thankful we had made it.

The Beast was here too.

Even worse, the Pyramids were patrolled by armed guards.

They started firing on the plane the moment it stopped moving, the bullets pinging off the aluminum, peppering it with holes. The only one they could kill with the rounds was Sarah, but they could still be effective at inflicting pain and slowing us down. I was surprised he was taking the risk of hitting her, but he seemed to be a pretty good shot.

I took two bullets in the arm and another in the leg, wincing

each time I felt the stinging pain blossom through my body. I knew by the grunt and groans and curses that the others were hit too. We made a run for the Pyramid, trying to keep the plane between the bullets and us, and casting aside any of the possessed tourists that tried to block our path.

"This look familiar, kid?" one of them asked, flipping me the bird right before I tossed him to the ground. Maybe I shouldn't have saluted him like that.

"Do you have any idea where we're going?" Adam asked. His arm was bleeding from a bullet wound.

"I don't even know if this is the right pyramid." I really, really, hoped Obi had been right about the whole secret room thing. It sounded like something that could have been left by Malize.

"How do we find out?" His hand shot out and blocked a punch from an old woman in a purple skirt. He grabbed her and pushed her to the ground, as soft as he dared. She fell to the ground laughing.

"Unless hurting them will make you fall, you don't need to be gentle," I said. "They die when he lets them go."

Adam's angry look reflected what I was feeling.

"There has to be an entrance somewhere. A glamoured wall, or maybe a hieroglyphic that looks like Malize's signature. It could be anywhere, or nowhere."

We kept running, from one side of the Pyramid around to another. At least the corners gave us respite from the gunfire. It didn't stop the puppets though, and I could swear they were multiplying.

"We should have come in the middle of the night," Charis shouted.

"Just look for the symbol."

We were around to the south side, opposite where we had landed, when we found it. I had focused to enhance my eyesight and see the lines in the stone more clearly, and even then I attributed at least half the discovery to luck. Someone had defaced the Pyramid more recently by scratching their initials into the rock. The change in texture had drawn a closer inspection, and I had found Malize's sigil behind it.

"Izak, Adam, you're on defense. We need some time."

"How do we open it?" Sarah asked.

I put my hand to the symbol, feeling around it. The stone was

solid. I focused, reaching past it, trying to feel the density of the structure beyond. It was solid too.

"I wish I knew."

"The Great Pyramid?" The Beast asked, from the voice of a small girl. "Interesting."

I ignored him, and kept searching. Charis knelt down next to me, wiping away the sand under the symbol, to see if there was another clue that had been buried by time.

"I don't know what you think you're going to find in there," he said. Both Izak and Adam were occupied with the larger puppets, so they allowed him to walk right up to us and lean over our shoulder. "Maybe you need to piss on it?"

"Sod off," Charis said, without looking at him.

The Beast laughed, a child's chipmunk laugh. "Am I bother-" He stopped mid-sentence, shoving me to the side so he could look at the pyramid wall. His head snapped towards me, long hair whipping around behind it.

Every voice joined in chorus at the same time. "Malize?"

So, he remembered the name. "You know him?"

He didn't get to answer. Sarah reached down and grabbed the girl by the shoulders. "Go to sleep, child," she said in a gentle voice. "It's a nightmare, that's all. Just a nightmare."

"Your nightmare," the Beast said, his fear and surprise masked by the normal smugness. "It's just start-"

The child's eyes fluttered back, and she fell to the sand.

"She's alive," Sarah said.

The realization face-palmed me. "He's spread too thin to resist your power." It wouldn't stop the assault against us, but it would certainly limit it. "How many can you Calm?"

Sarah turned to where Izak and Adam were doing their best to knock the Beast's prisoners back. I could feel her power building. "Rest, all of you," she said. It was a Calm Command, an ability unique to her. "You're all having a bad dream, and you must rest."

The power spread out from her, a charge in the air that I could feel throughout my soul. The Beast began to growl in frustration, but he wasn't strong enough to hold on. The mass of people rolled their eyes, and fell.

"Landon, look," Charis said.

I turned back towards the pyramid, and saw that Malize's symbol was glowing.

“What do you think it-“

The pyramid was gone. The sand was gone. The collapsed mortals were gone. Adam and Izak were both gone. Charis, Sarah, and I were standing in the middle of a large limestone room, filled with dry air and lit by the sigils etched into the walls. Templar script, tightly drawn. It began to glow brighter.

“This is unbelievable,” Sarah said, turning around to look at the glowing writing.

“Look.” I pointed at the wall, where a small door was pressed into the stone, so well measured that there was no seam. I only knew it was there because of a small gold handle. “I guess Obi was right.”

The symbols grew brighter, and brighter still, until the entire room was bathed in white light. It reflected off the polished sandstone, and off the gold handle. It reflected until there was nothing but light, in a whiteness that reminded me of the wall between what Ross had once told be was the ‘staging area’ and Purgatory.

He appeared as though stepping through the light, or maybe stepping out of it. Malize. The archangel looked different from when we had seen him only two days ago, older and more wise. His hair was streaked with white, and he was a wearing a white cloak that flowed to his feet and covered most of his form.

“Diuscrucis,” he said, bowing to all of us. “I’m glad that you made it.”

“Malize,” Charis said, returning his bow. “What’s going on?”

“You were too late to prevent the Beast from being freed,” he said, looking directly at Sarah. Her face turned red and she looked down. “Do not be ashamed, child. I had feared that such a thing would come to pass. So many thin threads, so many lost hopes. I knew one day the Pure One would come, and the Beast’s prison may be shattered. You should be proud for escaping his grasp.”

She looked up at him and smiled. “You’re beautiful,” she said. “So many colors.”

He held up his hand, and as before we were transported back in time. To the building of the Great Pyramid. While thousands of workers lifted stone around him, Malize stood at the limestone panels that would line this room and carved his symbols. “From the first moments after Lucifer and I had imprisoned it, I surmised that the balance would require a way for it to escape, and that the

likelihood that it would succeed was not minimal. To that end, I began to prepare. This room is one such preparation, a means by which I could intercede if needed, and offer guidance based on the experience and wisdom I have gained. More millennia than you can count have passed in the Cave of Christ since I first begged of my Lord Jesus to assist me in removing myself from your universe. I have spent much of that time in meditation and contemplation, waiting for this day that I prayed would come."

Of course. The Beast hadn't known Malize was still around, because he had never heard a peep from anyone about it. That was because nobody could remember who or what he was.

"And the clue to get us here?" I asked. 'That was another of your preparations?"

He smiled. "Yes. That was another. It was much harder to execute, as it required finding the right soul. One who would spend time in Purgatory, who could leave the clue. That; however, is in the past. What is more important is what I can tell you today. You have Avriel's Box?"

Charis reached into her pocket and removed it, holding it in her palm. "How did you know about it?"

"I would not be very prepared, if I had no way to observe," he replied. "I have seen your efforts. You've done well, although losing the Redeemer may be a challenging misstep."

"The Redeemer?" I asked.

He nodded. "The Canaan Blade. I had hoped it would provide useful to you. It was difficult to obtain."

"I saved Landon with it," Charis said. "So it did come in handy, even if we lost it."

"It only works on demons anyway," I said.

He smiled. "That is not the whole truth of it, but it is enough."

"What else does it do?"

"It is of no importance, now. It may be that losing it will cost us. It may be that it won't. I have made arrangements to help us adjust for its dispossession."

The location around us faded and changed. Now we were inside the Beast's prison. "This is the prison, the day it was completed," Malize said. It didn't look much different than I remembered it. "Hold up the Box, and compare."

Charis held it up, and we each looked at it, and then back at the prison. Both had sigils etched everywhere, though the Box's were in

seraph runes, not Templar script. Other than that, I didn't see any similarities. I wasn't looking close enough.

"The symbols," Sarah said. "There." She pointed at the prison. "There." She pointed at the Box. "They are almost the same. Those also." She pointed at another section. "And those."

Malize nodded. "Yes. Almost the same. So many of the symbols are similar, yet different. Avriel's design is a wonder, a work of art. He had no knowledge of what we had done to capture the Beast, and yet he was so close to creating the perfect prison."

"Perfect? He ended up trapped in it himself."

"Not because the design is flawed," Malize said. "It was his understanding of the power needed to keep a creature like Abaddon contained that failed him. That is why I am glad you came, and why I am especially glad you have the Box."

"So, we can trap the Beast in it?" I asked.

He nodded again. "In time, yes."

Huh? "What do you mean in time? He's getting stronger, not weaker."

"Yes, I know. The trouble is that while the design of the Box is incredible, these symbols were made to catch a demon. You need to catch something else entirely."

I glanced over to Charis when I saw her smile. She must have been thinking the same thing I was thinking. We're gonna need a bigger boat. "So we need to make some modifications?"

"Not you," he said. "Avriel. He's the only one who can work out the calculations. He needs to convert these seraphim runes to Templar script."

I didn't like the sound of that. "Malize, I hate to sound ungrateful," I said. "But first, the Beast has Avriel. Second, I don't think he knows Templar script."

The room changed around us again. We were on a mountaintop, at what looked like an old monastery. I could swear I had seen the place before in a kung-fu movie.

"Avriel is here. Mortals call it Mt. Popa, in Burma."

"And…" I said, knowing it couldn't be that simple.

"The Beast convinced Abaddon to join him. This was how. He promised him that he would place Avriel somewhere that the demon could always return to torture him, even after the destruction of the rest of the world. After you slipped past him, the Beast had him return to wait for you. He knows the Box can hold

him, but he also knows the Box can hold anything, if enough power is fed into it. He needs Avriel for his endgame."

It was the way he said it that made my spine tingle. "You mean he hopes to trap God?" That was a tough idea to wrap my head around.

"Yes. If the calculations are correct, with the full power of the Beast… I believe it can be done. You need to rescue the archangel from Abaddon."

I felt an uncomfortable rocking in the pit of my stomach. "How are we supposed to do that? Even Izak is afraid of him, and I got lucky with the sucker punch."

Malize smiled. "The Redeemer would have suited you well for this purpose, but as I've said, I've made preparations. It may indeed work out for the best, for the Deliverer is a much more potent weapon against a creature like Abaddon."

"The Deliverer?"

"Another of the Canaan Blades," he replied. "There is a Templar waiting for you in Kyoto, at The Golden Pavilion. He will assist you in acquiring it."

"You mean you don't already have it?" I asked. I didn't like the sound of that.

"Unfortunately, we do not. The Canaan Blades were stolen almost one thousand years ago. It took extraordinary effort and the deaths of many Templars to even recover the one."

"Wait," Charis said. "Malize, why was I never told about this?" She sounded upset.

"I'm truly sorry," he said. "The less you knew about the Blades, the better. We could not afford for you to attract the attention of the Inquisitors."

She still didn't look happy. It seemed like the perfect time to interject. "Okay, so I go to Japan and acquire the Deliverer. We use it against Abaddon. We rescue Avriel. Great. He still doesn't know Templar script."

"No, but Charis does. She can guide his hand. Based on the advanced nature of his original design, I have no doubt he'll master the language in no time."

I laughed. "Which is about how much we have."

"Do not fear," Malize said. "Remember, as long as the Pure One lives, the Beast cannot claim his full strength. As long as you live, you have the ability to stop it." He reached under his cloak, and

pulled out a pair of silver bracelets. They were covered in Templar scripture, and the white light refracted strangely off the etched surface. He tossed one to me, and one to Charis.

"I don't know how, but the Beast is using the power of your Source, of Purgatory, to track your movements. These bracelets will subdue that power, and prevent it from being visible to him. Be cautious, as this also means you will not be able to affect change to anything outside of yourselves for as long as you are wearing them."

I knew how. The power in Purgatory was the Beast's power. It made sense that he could track us with it. I put the bracelet over over my wrist and squeezed it closed. "Thank you."

"Yes, thank you, Malize," Charis said. "For everything."

"I have done what I can. If you need to speak to me again, the Templar can help you find the other portal I've left in the mortal realm." He walked over to Sarah, and knelt down in front of her, putting himself below her. He took her hands in his and looked up at her face. "I know of the war that rages in you, child. Do not be afraid to open your heart, for it is that common thread that binds all of His children that will lead you to your destiny."

Sarah didn't respond. She just kept her head down at him. Were there words being exchanged in the silence? I'd never know.

Malize rose back to his feet, and bowed to Charis and I. "Godspeed to you both," he said. He took another step back, and was collected by the light.

I turned to Charis and Sarah. "At least we know what to do," I said. I didn't get a chance to say more, because the light began to intensify, reaching for us in blinding fury. Before I could even move, we were back out on the sand.

"Well?" Adam asked. "Is anything happening?" He was still facing the people Sarah had put to sleep, watching them for any signs of movement. In the twenty minutes we had spent with Malize, not even a second had passed here.

"We're done," I said. "We need to get to Japan."

We made our way back around the Great Pyramid, keeping an eye out for any more mortals possessed by the Beast. Between Sarah shutting down his vessels, and learning that Malize was involved, he seemed to have retreated.

"Who did you speak to again?" Adam asked.

I had explained everything to Izak and the seraph as we ran, in a

condensed version. The details weren't that important anyway. Even so, he had already forgotten the archangel's name.

"The important part is that we get to Kyoto as soon as possible," I said. "Today is your lucky day. You might get two of your swords back by the time this is over."

"I still can't believe it," he said. "We've been searching for the Deliverer for over a thousand years. To think we have a lead on someone who knows where it is."

"Yeah, crazy," I agreed. "You said the Canaan Blades have special properties? What does this one do?"

"It makes the wielder immune to demons. Hellfire, cursed weapons, claws, Command, everything. It will deliver the carrier through any battle."

I could see how that would come in handy against Abaddon.

We pulled up next to the small airplane. It was riddled with bullet holes. Charis stepped up into it. "Let's see if this thing can still go," she said, hitting switches and starting the propeller. I knew from her memories she knew how to pilot pretty much anything that flew. She even knew how to drive a train, if needed. We rarely needed to sleep, after all.

I felt a tug on my shirt, and turned to look at Izak. He had a pissed off, dour expression on his face.

"What's up?" I asked him.

He knelt down and drew a circle in the sand, and a few runes. A rift. Then he drew a rectangle with a circle in it. He wiped both of them out with his foot.

"No rifts in Japan? Are you kidding?"

He shook his head, holding out his palm and quickly squeezing it closed. Destroyed.

"When?"

He shrugged, and then motioned with his finger. Not too long. Did someone know we were coming? Or had they destroyed them to stop something else?

"Next closest option?" I asked.

"South Korea," Charis said for him. "Across the Sea of Japan. It'll take us days to get there."

"Crap," I said, looking at the ground. I didn't like the chances of humanity surviving the Beast for hours, never mind days.

"I can take one of you," Adam said.

"Take?" I asked. I had an outside understanding of what he was

suggesting, but I didn't think it was possible. "Won't you fall, if you help us like that?"

He smiled. "Before, yes, but I'm the Ninth now. As you know, we have certain… freedoms, that the others do not. Since helping you will allow me to retrieve one of the Canaan Blades, I believe the cause is just."

Angels and their games. I returned his smile, and then leaned into the airplane. "Can you get Sarah and Izak back to the rift?"

"Of course," she replied. "Meet at the church?"

"Yeah." I reached into my pocket, pulled out my phone, and tossed it to her. "Try to get in touch with Obi, if you can. Tell him what's going on and to stay as close to the church as possible." I looked back at Adam. "I'm hoping Mr. Ninth back there can convince Kassie to give up the hunt and help us out with the Beast."

"Things are going to get messy, Landon," she said.

"They aren't already?" I replied. "We need to get the rest of the Divine involved, or we'll never have a chance of getting close enough to the real Beast to put him in the Box. Adam believes, so it's a start."

I helped Sarah into the plane. Izak hopped up on his own. "Take care of them," I said to him on his way by. He nodded.

"I'll see you soon," I said to Charis. I wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't come.

"You're damn right you will," she said. I saw her pull the bracelet off her wrist, and then she leaned over and pulled the door closed, and the plane began to roll forward. It would have been tough going in sand, but I could see it flattening and compressing in front of the wheels as she made herself a runway.

"Are you ready, diuscrucis?" Adam asked.

I walked back to him. "Watch where you put your hands," I said.

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He laughed as he put his arms up under my shoulders. “This is going to feel strange, since you’ve never done it before.” He crouched slightly, and then pushed off, his wings spreading and flapping a few times. I felt my heart drop beyond my stomach, passing down to my groin as we rocketed into the sky. It took me a few beats to get my breath back, and when I did I let out a scream of fear and joy. I felt like a kid on his first roller coaster.

“This is awesome,” I shouted. I had flown myself in Purgatory, but it wasn’t the same. This was real.

“*I have missed this* ,” Josette said, her voice rising up for the first time in a while. I could feel her excitement beneath my own, adding to it.

“It almost makes you wish you had been a little less evil, doesn’t it?” Adam asked.

In other circumstances, I might have called him an asshole for making a statement like that. Right then, I was having too much fun to care.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, ” Josette said. “*There is little enough to be*

had in times like these. ”

We were above the clouds in no time. Adam wrapped his legs around mine as he turned horizontal, holding me below him like a tandem skydiver. His wings swept back, and I felt our velocity increase beyond anything possible with mechanical flight.

The ride only lasted for a minute or two at most. Then we were falling, dropping towards the ground thousands of miles from where we started. I saw the Earth approaching once we cleared the clouds, and felt the blood rising to my head. Below us, I could see the gray of the city of Kyoto, and the green of the ground around it.

“That’s the Golden Pavilion over there,” Adam said, motioning with his foot. “I’ll bring us down over on that brown area, where it’s more quiet.”

As we neared the ground, he flared his wings out again, turning the ends so they caught the air like a parachute, and slowing us down to a still jarring speed. The impact would have crushed human bones.

“Thanks for the lift,” I said when he let go of my arms. “I take it you’ve been here before?”

“This is one of my favorite places,” he said. “Heaven is amazing, but there is a lot to contemplate within the beauty of this world that He created.”

We walked through the surrounding brush and down to a quiet path. There were only a few tourists and a small collection of locals still walking the gardens. The sun was hidden by a thin layer of high clouds, but even through them I could tell it would be setting soon.

“Who are we meeting?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. I hadn’t told him about the Templars. It was too big of a secret to just go spilling to an angel, even if they had proven themselves at least somewhat reliable. Instead, I had just said there was someone waiting for us. “Either I’ll know when I see them, or they’ll know when they see me.” In fact, as long as I was wearing Malize’s bracelet I couldn’t use my Sight beyond its natural range, which was visual. I’d rather be surprised by a seraph or a demon than the Beast and his puppet armies.

We turned right at the sign that pointed to the Pavilion, an impressive, gold-painted pagoda sitting on the edge of a small pond. It was a perfect Japanese botanical landscape, and despite everything I couldn’t help but admire the composition. There were

only a few people standing around, looking out at the water.

I recognized our contact right away. I should have known. I tapped Adam on the shoulder and pointed him out.

"Max," I said, shouldering up to him and leaning over the railing. Adam stopped on the opposite side.

He didn't move his head, only his eyes, from my side to Adam's and back. "Diuscrucis," he said, a little too excited. "You brought a playmate?" He looked back at Adam. "Not the companion I would have expected. Was it wise to leave our little peanut on her own?"

"Sarah's hardly on her own," I replied. "Charis and Izak are with her. Besides, it would have taken forever to get them here. Did you know someone's been destroying the rifts?"

He rubbed his chin. "Hmmm… yes, well I suppose it makes sense. The Beast freed Abaddon. He doesn't care about how you're aligned, only if you make a tasty treat. I'm sure the demons want to keep him away as much as anyone else does. I expect more of the rifts will fall in a hurry." He shrugged it off, and his eyes brightened. "You did say Izak? Oh yes, I've been hearing rumors about that one. Is there any truth to them?"

"If you mean that he's a badass? Yes. That's why I know Sarah's in good hands."

His grin spread from ear to ear, and he turned to Adam, holding out his hand. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, mister…"

Adam looked at the fiend's hand, and then at me. Max pulled it back.

"Too much of a stretch, I suppose," he said. "No matter, my good man. One you've been through the torture of Hell, a little surliness is a walk in the park. No pun intended. Ha-ha."

"Max, you know why we're here," I said.

He reached up and put his arm around my shoulders. "I do, old chap. I'm prepared to lead you on this little adventure. First, I need you to do one thing."

"What's that?"

"Just say the words you know I want to hear." He put his face in mine, his huge grin too comical for me to be annoyed.

"Fine. You were right about the trap. I trust you."

He let me go and slapped me on the back. "Bully!" he cried. "Jolly good. Well then, off we go." He turned and started walking back up the path.

"Max," I said, trailing behind him. "Where are we going?"

He stopped again. “I should tell you that, shouldn’t I? Very well, have you ever heard of the Nicht Creidim?”

I had no idea what he was talking about. “Nick Creedem? No, is he a demon, or an angel?”

“Ho-ho. Not Nick Creedem. *The* Nicht Creidim. I’ll assume that since you can’t pronounce it you don’t know who I’m referring to. They’re mortals. Awake mortals. A ‘family’ as it were. They’re collectors of Divine artifacts. Anything that has Divine power, they want.”

I had definitely never heard of them.

“*Josette* ?”

I felt her presence illuminate my soul. “*I have heard the word before, but I have never met them. Some think they are a myth. Others believe they exist, but they don’t meddle much in the affairs of the Divine.* ”

“*They’re vultures* ,” Ulnyx said. “*They hide in dark corners, and pick at the remains on the battlefields. They’ll collect anything Divine - weapons, clothing, blood. Anything they can get before it wastes away.* ”

“They’re vultures,” I said to Max. “My question is, why?”

“Why, what?” he replied.

“Why do they take Divine stuff? For what purpose?”

“Divine ‘stuff’ as you say, is very powerful stuff, especially for a mortal. They take it because they feel it can help them maintain the power and influence of the ‘family’, and perhaps one day even grow it. I wouldn’t call them vultures. It was Nicht Creidim assassins who murdered the seraphs given the Canaan Blades. It took hundreds of years to find out where they were keeping the Redeemer, and now the Deliverer. It took the deaths of many to get the Redeemer back.”

“What about the other blade, then?” I asked. “What about the Swords of Gehenna?”

He cast his eyes at Adam, hesitant about how much to say. “It is likely they have them as well, though we don’t know where.”

“You’re a fiend. Can’t you just Command them to tell you?”

He shook his head. “Ah, no, my good man. You see, the Nicht Creidim are an interesting lot. They tend towards inbreeding, with just enough breakage in the direct lineage to prevent the genetic deficiencies normally associated with such activity. The reason they do it is because it has allowed them to develop certain… resistances to the Divine. Most likely stemming from an initial contact with an

artifact that gave the original progenitor some amount of immunization."

"Like someone who drank from the Holy Grail?" I asked. Wouldn't that be a pisser, if one of the original Templars had gone off and created his own cult?

"Precisely," he said. "They're a secretive lot, as you can imagine. They don't tend to fight the Divine unless threatened, so for the most part they stay under their radar."

"Not if they have the Canaan Blades," Adam said. "When First hears about this, she's going to be on them like a bee on a flower."

Max stopped walking and rounded on the seraph. "Landon, you naughty boy, you didn't tell me he was an Inquisitor." He got right up in Adam's face, his expression turning dark. "One, that was the least manly simile I could imagine. Two, you'll say nothing to Kassie about the Nicht Creidim and the Blades. You have no idea what trouble you would be causing by bringing your little S.W.A.T team down on them."

Adam backed up a step and raised his hands. "Whoa, no offense, little man," he said. "I'm just trying to do my job. You know, the Lord's work."

"The Lord's work does not include mass murder," he said.

"We won't kill them," Adam replied. "Not unless it is absolutely necessary."

Max started laughing. "Ha-ha! Now that is what I love about the seraphim. I'm talking about the mass murder of angels," he said. "Don't underestimate them because they're mortal. There is a reason they've held the Blades for over a thousand years."

Adam backed down, but he didn't look convinced.

"Guys," I said. "It doesn't matter right now. Nobody is going to be getting anything if the Beast has his way."

"Right you are," Max agreed.

"So, let's try this again. Where are we going?"

"Port of Osaka," Max said. "The Nicht Creidim own a shipping company. It makes it easier to move the artifacts around. I'll bring you as close as I can, but you have to go in alone."

"Go in alone?" I hadn't been expecting that.

"They're mortal, but they have a kind of Sight. They'll know if there are Divine headed their way, and they'll prepare a pretty nasty defense. So, old chap, you'll have to disguise yourself and try to talk your way in. Show them that fancy bracelet, and tell them

you're looking to sell it. See if you can get them to show you around. I have it on good authority the Deliverer is in there. I just don't know where."

I looked at Malize's bracelet. I wasn't too keen on taking it off. "Where are you going to be?"

He clapped his hands. "Waiting nearby, of course."

"Fine," I said, taking a deep breath. "How do I recognize the sword?"

"Have you ever heard of Excalibur?" he asked.

King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table. Who hadn't? "Of course."

"That's its stage name, so whatever you think Excalibur looks like, there you go. Just be sure not to use it until you're ready, or you're going to bring a lot of attention to yourself."

I did a double-take. "Wait. You're telling me the Deliverer is Excalibur? That Excalibur is real?"

He rolled his eyes and spread his hands. "Well, duh. Arthur was one of ours. So were his knights."

Unbelievable.

Max had a car, and we piled into it. It wasn't a long drive from Kyoto to the port, especially with the traffic subconsciously moving out of our way. Within thirty minutes we were pulling to a stop in a dirty, industrial part of town. Darkness was beginning to settle here, and there was a distinct quiet that had me on edge. I rubbed my hand absently on Malize's bracelet, hoping that it was doing what he had claimed it would. There was no sign of the Beast, but I was still getting a creepy feeling.

Max pointed ahead through the windshield. "Three buildings down, turn left. Walk until you hit the water, then turn right. Keep going until you see a long, low stone building with a blue roll-up door. That's it. Knock out S.O.S in Morse code, and they'll open up to check you out. Do you know Mr. Morse?"

I didn't, but Josette did. I nodded. "One question. Will they be able to see my eyes?" They would be a dead giveaway that I was more than human.

Max opened the glovebox and reached in, then handed me a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses. "Just don't take them off," he advised.

It didn't seem like the best plan, but what else could we do? I pushed open the door and climbed out, making sure to focus,

adjusting my signature to true neutral and vanishing from the Sight of anyone who had it. “You two lovebirds say out of trouble,” I said. Neither looked pleased at being left with the other. I gently closed the door and started walking.

There wasn’t much to it. I turned left where Max had instructed, until I got to the edge of the bay. I stopped when I reached the water, looking out at the ships in the harbor, and then at the glow of the rising moon, diffused by the light clouds. It took some doing to imagine all of it going away, under the Beast’s destructive thumb. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

“*I’ve always loved the moon* ,” Ulnyx said with a chuckle. “*Do you know why weres are so often associated with howling at full moons? It’s when the bitches get the most horny* .”

“*Shut up* ,” I said, ignoring his amusement.

The sound of my tapping Morse code on the blue door echoed in the emptiness of the late evening. No sooner had I finished the last rap than I heard a click, and the door moved, sliding up and out of view and revealing a face behind it.

“Who are you?” the girl asked. She was maybe eighteen or nineteen, with long black hair and a pale complexion. Her eyes were almond-shaped, and she had a pert little nose on a small face. She looked like a mix of Japanese with something more European.

I didn’t give her a name, I just held up my arm and tapped on the bracelet. “I heard I could find someone who might be interested in a piece like this here.”

Her expression didn’t change, but she leaned in and looked at it. When she backed away, she was smiling. “You heard correct, Mr…”

“Smith,” I said with a smile.

She gave me a small bow. “Of course. Follow me.”

She led me into the open area of the warehouse. It was filled with shipping containers, crates, and boxes. Forklifts sat half-loaded, as though they had been abandoned as soon as it had hit closing time, and only the auxiliary lights were on. I scanned the area visually, but I didn’t see anyone else in there.

“That’s an interesting piece,” she said as we walked. “How did you come by it?”

“I stole it,” I said. “I’d heard there were buyers for stuff with this kind of etching on it. What is it, Japanese?”

She laughed, a cute little choppy chuckle. “Oh no, Mr. Smith. Not Japanese. Something much older.” We reached the end of the

warehouse, and she put her palm up to an electronic lock. It beeped, and she bent down to lift another door. Behind it was an elevator.

"Pretty cool kit," I said.

"We can never be too careful," she replied. "We deal in priceless antiquities that are highly desired by a number of parties. Not all of whom are willing to be above the table in working with us."

"I can imagine. You don't have a problem with the means by which I obtained this, do you?"

She turned and looked at it again. "Oh no. One man's loss, is another's gain. If they didn't want a professional such as yourself to take it, they should have been more careful."

I couldn't help but smile at that. "My sentiments exactly," I said.

The elevator descended fifty or sixty feet, and then opened up into an empty cement corridor that was about twenty feet long. The whole thing reminded me of how the Templars had positioned the Cave of Christ in order to keep it safe. I guess it was a common tactic.

She used her palm to open a huge iron door at the end of the hall, and we had to wait upwards of a minute for the machinery behind it to get it open. She stared at me the whole time.

"Can I help you with something else, Miss…?" I realized I hadn't gotten her name.

"Smith," she replied, with a wink and a smile. "To be honest, I was just admiring your physique."

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't glamoured, because they' d probably have seen right through it anyway. That meant it was just me, which in my opinion wasn't really that impressive. Thin build, a little bit of muscle, but a Hollywood idol I was not.

"Did I embarrass you?" she asked. "I promise I can make it up to you later, once your business with father is concluded."

The door finished its slide up into the ceiling, and she led me ahead, into a red carpeted hallway. Hanging from the walls on either side were display cases of thick, bulletproof glass. Inside of them were a whole mess of things. Arrowheads, daggers, chalices, clothes. It seemed they'd put the demonic stuff on one side, and the angelic stuff on the other.

"You don't look like you need any more of this stuff," I said, trying to get off the last topic. I have to admit, her giggle was really cute.

“We can never have enough, until we have it all,” she replied. We reached the end of this corridor, stopping at a pair of heavily runed wooden doors. She used her palm one more time, and the doors swung inward.

It was like an underground palace. Glossy marble floors, a high ceiling with a fake skylight at top, and two decks of hallway connected by twin staircases. It reminded me of Rebecca’s father’s penthouse, except much, much grander. In the center of the room, glinting in the fake sunlight that was focused on it, was the hilt and last six inches of the blade of a sword. The rest of it was jammed into a large, smooth stone. I couldn’t help but stare.

“Do you like it?” She asked me.

“It’s incredible,” I replied. “It reminds me of King Arthur’s sword. Excalibur?”

She giggled again. “I have to go get father. Please wait here.” She headed off to a door on the east side of the room.

“*Just take it* ,” Ulnyx said. “*You can get out of here before she gets back.* ”

“*Don’t be foolish, Were* ,” Josette replied. “*There is nothing natural about the light that’s shining down on it. It’s probably an alarm.* ”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said. Still, I wasn’t sure I would have much choice. I wasn’t about to let the bracelet go, even on the off chance they would be willing to trade for it.

“Oh, what would that be?”

I hadn’t meant to say it out loud. I turned east to where Ms. Smith was standing with an older man. He was a military type, with a white flat-top, a grizzled face, and a tough expression. He also looked like he could whip me six ways to Sunday.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” I walked over to him and held out my hand. He ignored it, his eyes going right to the bracelet.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” he said. His voice had a weird, constant hoarseness to it. Like he spent ninety percent of his time yelling. “Where’d you come across something like that?”

I didn’t answer right away. I was still considering my options, and realizing I didn’t have any. I took a deep breath, reached up, and took off the sunglasses. “An archangel gave it to me,” I said, dropping my disguise and letting them See me if they could.

“Divver,” Ms. Smith cried. Before I could blink, she had a dagger in her hand, and was crouching down, ready for a fight. Her father hadn’t moved.

Divver? That was a new one.

“Interesting,” he said, looking me over. “I’ve heard about you. I didn’t think you’d be making an appearance though. It’s Landon, right?”

I wasn’t that surprised he knew who I was. You couldn’t collect so many Divine artifacts without being pretty up on our day to day. “That’s right,” I said. “And you are?”

“Joe,” he replied. “Father Joe to my family.” His daughter was still crouched, ready to fight. He looked over at her. “I’ll tell you what, Landon. You beat my girl in hand to hand, I won’t call in the rest of the troops and I’ll listen to whatever it is you came to say. I figure if you were here to fight, you would’ve gotten to it already.”

It was more reasonable than I’d expected, based on what Max had told me. “F-“

Before I could finish speaking, she had launched herself at me with a speed that should have been impossible for a mortal. I got my hands up in time, crossing them over to block her downward strike with my forearms, then pushed back against her to break us up.

“Not bad,” she said with a smile. She turned the knife over in her hand, putting it against her arm, and came again.

I had enough time to focus now, and I slipped away from her attacks without too much difficulty, twisting and turning away from one slash after another, then a kick and a leg sweep. They wanted to test me, so I decided to test her.

“More than not bad,” she said, her breathing a little heavier. “Do you do other things as well as you fight?”

I could only imagine what she meant. I felt a little rush of blood headed upwards. “You’ll never know,” I replied.

“Don’t count me out so quickly.” She came at me again, faster than before. I don’t know how she did it, but even pulling on my power it was tough to keep ahead. It was time to stop fooling around. I went on a short offensive, returning her strikes with some of my own. I got one through to her chest, and with my enhanced strength and speed I thought it would be over, but she didn’t even bat an eyelash.

I hesitated for just a second, trying to figure out why she hadn’t gone flying away. Something on her had to be shutting me down. She took advantage of my confusion, bringing the dagger up and across my face, digging it deep into my cheek. I grunted and took a

few steps back, ready to defend against her next blow.

It didn't come. She stood there, shocked that she had cut me? I glanced over at Joe. He had a curious expression. Then I realized they were waiting for me to die. The blade was enchanted after all. I hadn't gotten a good look at whether it was Cursed or Blessed. Either way, the wound healed.

"So it's true," Joe said. "Divine weapons can't hurt you."

"No, they can hurt me," I said. "They just can't kill me. Not unless you take my head off."

I shouldn't have said that. She crouched down and charged towards me again, somehow dialing her speed up another notch.

I moved away, looking for something to use as a weapon. My back smacked into the stone in the center of the room. Why not?

The light burned my hand as I reached in and grabbed the sword's hilt, pulling it out of the rock in one smooth motion. I shifted it to my other hand just in time to start deflecting dagger strikes, the burning causing more pain than I thought it should have. I could only imagine how Izak felt.

Ms. Smith sped up, I sped up. We both moved faster and faster, the two blades smacking against each other in an impossibly quick rhythm. Block, parry, dodge, strike. On and on it went, twirling around the room like some kind of sharp waltz. It was a work of art, I knew. A composition even Mozart would have been proud of.

Then it was over. I caught the dagger between the blade and the guard and twisted, pulling it from her hands and sending it tumbling away. She tried to go after it, but I managed to put the edge against her neck and stop her cold.

"I win," I said.

She looked at me and smiled. She had a hunger in her eyes. A hunger I'd seen before, in someone else. It made me uncomfortable.

Joe's clapping got my attention.

"Bravo," he said. "My dear, I'm amazed by how much you've improved." He looked at me. "And you. You're a virtuoso."

It wasn't really me. It was Josette's connection that guided me in the fight, but he didn't need to know about that.

"So. What can I do for you, Landon?"

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The blue door rolled open, exposing me once more to the outside air. It was much later than when I had gone in; too much later for my taste, but the fact that I was going out with the Deliverer in hand had made it worthwhile.

It had taken a long chat with Joe to convince him of my need to borrow the weapon. In the end, he had been wise in recognizing that the Beast was a threat to all of our ideals, not just those of the Divine. It didn't hurt that the Nicht Creidim had a credo that fell pretty close to my own goals. They believed the end of the world was unavoidable, and they wanted to be sure to have the best chance of defending the remainder of humanity from the coming Divine hordes.

I wish that could have meant they would agree to more of an alliance than a loan, but their goal was to survive the Apocalypse and get rid of the Divine once and for all, not prevent it and keep living in the current state of stalemate. From my position I could see where they were coming from, even if it meant that in the end, if I were the last 'Divver' left standing, they would be out for my

blood too.

"Good luck, Landon," Elyse said, putting her arms around me and leaning up. I tried to turn my head to let her kiss my cheek, but her other hand came up and held it. Her lips found mine, sending me off with soft, warm passion. "I hope to see you again."

I didn't kiss her back, but she didn't seem to notice, or care. "You will," I said, holding up the sword. "I promised I would give this back to you."

That was the one hitch in my successful retrieval of the weapon. I'd sworn to Joe I would return it once the Beast was defeated. I swore on an ancient copy of the Bible, and I'd felt the inner chains that made the promise binding. I didn't know what would happen to me if I reneged, but I had a feeling it wouldn't be pleasant. Somehow, I had to convince Adam, Kassie, and the rest of their crew that it had been necessary, and they'd have to pay Joe a visit on their own if they wanted the Canaan Blade back. The good news was it only mattered if we succeeded.

I gave Elyse one last wave, and the door rolled closed. I stood out on the empty street for a minute and took a deep breath, and then headed back to the car.

"*You should've taken her up on her offer* ," Ulnyx said. "*A body like that* ."

Her body had been the work of a higher power. I was surprised they had shown none of the physical signs I associated with the inbreeding Max had claimed.

"*Shut up* ," I replied.

"*There* was *something about her* ," Josette added. "*Not her looks, Were, before you comment. It was the way she fought. If she were a Divine and appeared that young, I could understand, but she was all of twenty years old? "*

"*I thought the same thing, "* I said, remembering her speed and skill. "*I just assumed it was her Divver kit. "*

"*It may be, "* she replied.

It also may not.

"Sure took you long enough," Adam said when I reached the car. "I've been stuck here with this one for hours. It's one thing that he's a demon. It's another that he never stops talking."

Max turned around. "You should appreciate my good humor, instead of sitting there pouting."

"I wasn't pouting, I was thinking."

“Guys,” I said. I held up the sword. “Mission accomplished. Adam, it’s time to fly.”

The angel got out of the car, his eyes fixed to the sword. “May I?” he asked, reaching for it. I pulled it back.

“Sorry, Adam, but I’m not letting this thing out of my hands until Abaddon is disintegrating in front of me. I’ve been screwed too many times.”

Adam nodded, but he didn’t look happy.

“There he goes pouting again,” Max said. “Chin up, my good man. You’ll be caressing that lovely soon enough. How many did you have to kill? Were they tough? So many questions, so little time.”

I turned the blade over so I could hold it against my body, and lifted my arms for Adam to get a grip. “I didn’t have to kill any of them, but yeah, they were really tough. See you around, Max. Thanks.”

Adam hooked his arms under mine and bent slightly. Max put his fingers to his forehead and gave me a mock salute. “Give ‘em Hell. Or Heaven. Or whatever kills ‘em the best,” he said. Then we were going up.

I didn’t get quite as much enjoyment out of the second flight as I had the first. It probably had something to do with the fact that I was headed for a direct confrontation with the most powerful demon on Earth; a demon that even Izak ran away from. I could still remember the cold feelings of hopelessness just being near him had given me. It wasn’t something I was looking forward to. I gripped the Deliverer tighter.

“You won’t be able to get too close,” I said to Adam once he started descending. There was a thick layer of clouds here that left us blinded to the world around us. “You’ll have to drop me.”

I wasn’t looking forward to that either. With the bracelet on, I couldn’t slow my descent. All I could do was accept the broken bones and pain, and wait for it all to heal. It would be an excruciating and vulnerable couple of minutes, during which I was dependent on getting lucky that Abaddon wouldn’t notice, or couldn’t reach me in time.

“Are you sure?” he asked. I could tell by his voice he thought I was crazy.

It was crazy, but also necessary. I wasn’t sure what would happen to the seraph if he got too close. “Positive.”

The clouds gave way about a thousand feet over the monastery. Immediately I could see why they had chosen it. It sat on a level mountaintop, at least five hundred feet over the surrounding landscape, making it a difficult proposition for someone like me to approach unseen. Except, they hadn't been planning on me taking the Angel Express.

The second thing that registered was the desolation and destruction of everything around it. From up here, I could see the surrounding land, and the green of verdant field and forest. Until it got within a half-mile of the monastery. There, everything was brown and dead. Everything.

I knew there would be no other Divine, save for Abaddon and Avriel. I knew there would be no people either, that they would have been killed or have fled. Would they even know what had done it? To mortals, Abaddon was plague and pestilence, not a demon with a shrouded but very real face. Just more casualties in the hidden wars raging around them.

I could tell when Adam began feeling Abaddon's effects. His descent lost control for just a hair in time, his body seizing up and his grip on my arms tightening. He didn't let me go then, he kept trying to go further. We were still seven or eight hundred feet above the ground.

"It's time for me to drop," I said.

"I'll get you closer," he replied.

"Adam, let me go." I tilted my head so I could see his face. He was getting pale, and his forehead was beginning to sweat.

"I can get you down."

"Dammit, he's going to know I'm coming, you idiot," I shouted. I shoved my elbow back into his stomach, and he let go with a grunt. Trying to ignore my velocity, and block out the fear of the pain I knew was coming, I focused on making myself Sight neutral. I could only hope the demon hadn't caught me already.

To say it hurt would be understating the pain of hitting the ground from a five hundred foot free-fall. I did get lucky to land in a somewhat soft spot, my drop broken by a few branches of a tree before I smacked into the soft ground. I had held the Deliverer point down, knowing it would sink into the earth, which was better than having it go flying off to wherever.

I felt the bones break. Ribs, arms, legs, spine. The shock ran up my entire body, and I think it may have even caused some brain

damage, because my eyesight dimmed and everything felt off for a minute. I bounced once, high enough that when I let go of the sword I could see it buried in the ground to the hilt, and then laid there.

I did my best to keep my focus, to hide myself from Sight and beg myself to heal. In the moment I had dropped contact with the blade, I could feel the dark helplessness of Abaddon's power circling around me, trying to catch me in its emptiness.

"*That rocked it pretty hard* ," Ulnyx said with a laugh.

"*You don't feel the pain,* " I replied. "*So, shut up.* "

I laid there for three or four minutes, looking out for the demon. In this case, his power was a benefit, because I would see the dark tendrils arriving long before the actual creature did. It was a tense few minutes, but my body mended itself, and Abaddon didn't appear.

I pushed myself up, pulling the Deliverer from the ground as I did. I was only a dozen feet or so away from the monastery walls. I could see the gold towers rising above them. Was Avriel somewhere in one of those?

The place was larger than I had expected. How long would it take me to find the angel, even if I did defeat Abaddon? Time was still an issue. Even though the Beast couldn't find me now, I knew he was doing something in Mumbai, and I didn't need to know what to know it wasn't good.

I skirted the wall until I came to a tower with a porch and an open doorway. I stowed Excalibur and shifted, pulling on Ulnyx's power and giving myself the size and strength I needed to leap the distance. Huge claws dug in on the floor, and I climbed up, shifting back once I reached the doorway.

The inside was as stunning as I expected, filled with a mix of ancient oriental architecture and modern renovations. It was also deserted, dark, and cold. Dead monkeys lay huddled together on the floor, along with a pair of dead people. They were frozen on the ground, their mouths open, as though they had died of sheer terror.

I kept walking, letting go of the alterations on my Divine signature. Now that I was whole and inside, I wanted Abaddon to find me. It would make everything much easier.

It didn't take the demon long. I had only just reached the main courtyard when the pitch black tendrils of his power began snaking along the sides of the buildings and covering the sky in unnatural

darkness.

"Diuscrucis," it said, the word reverberating through the tendrils. "Did you come to die?"

I couldn't see him, not yet, but his power was wrapping around me, trying to trap me. I held the Deliverer a little tighter, feeling it warm in my palm. The runes along the surface of the blade began to glow in a soft white light, pushing back against the demon's power.

"You know why I came," I said. "Give me Avriel, and I'll leave without a fight."

His laughter shook the entire building, spreading a film of dust and mortar. "You won't be leaving. There is no need for me to fight."

The tendrils moved closer - bunching in, surrounding me, placing me in a cocoon of total darkness. I couldn't see anything around me. I couldn't see anything except the blade glowing in my hand, preventing me from losing myself to the despair and disease Abaddon wielded like a sword.

"The Beast will destroy you too, once he has the power. You aren't immune because you're strong." It was probably pointless, but I didn't think it could hurt to try.

"Perhaps," Abaddon said. "But ask yourself this, diuscrucis. Where do you see yourself in ten thousand years?"

I was ready for a fight. Now I paused. I'd never thought about such a distant future. I'd only been here for five years. Heck, I wasn't even through a mortal lifetime yet. Was Abaddon that old? Older? What was the future like? What would it be, when the whole world had changed? If I had tired of the fighting and the killing in five years, where would I be in one hundred? Where would I be in ten thousand?

"No smart answer?" he asked. "No idealistic retort? Maybe now you begin to understand what the Beast has to offer? Torturing the angel has its enjoyment, but even that will grow old in a millennia or two."

He showed himself then, stepping out into the open, his body barely visible to me through the shroud of panic he threw out around him.

"This isn't about me," I said. "This is about the billions of people who live here."

"Think, child. One hundred years is a millisecond to those who

cannot die. One hundred years and nearly every single person you are protecting today will be dust. All any of them lose is one hundred years. What do you gain?"

Rebecca had tried to recruit me. Rachel had tried to recruit me. Even Sarah had in her own way. None had made a case quite like Abaddon, but how could they? He was a destroyer, like the Beast. In fact, he had been made in that mold. He understood life and time in a way that they couldn't. What did I gain, fighting against them and surviving? More war? More killing? More death?

"*Landon* ," Ulnyx said, trying to get my attention.

Ten thousand years. Could I picture doing anything for ten thousand years?

"*Landon* ," Josette said.

"You're hesitation proves what you know to be true," Abaddon said. "Mortals think in such short terms, because it is all they have. You are a Divine. There is a bigger picture for you to look at."

I was looking at it, and I didn't like what I saw. Emptiness, hopelessness, sameness. Death, destruction, loss.

"*Landon* ," Ulnyx and Josette shouted, together.

It was like an electric shock. I looked at the Deliverer, hot in my hands, the once glowing scripture turning black. Somehow, he was overpowering it.

I closed my eyes and focused, pushing my own power to my hands, trying to bypass the bracelet and feed it directly through into the sword. It must have worked, because the darkness began to retreat again. Abaddon shrieked, and attacked.

How do you fight a creature shrouded in blackness, when you can never be sure of where his actual form is? He had dug his claws deep into my shoulder and thrown me to the ground before I had a chance to find out.

The Deliverer wasn't enough to keep him from hurting me, I realized. Not when I had my hands full holding off the life sap that came from his innate design. I rolled to my feet in time to hop back away from the darkest part of him, and then struck out at it with the sword. It sliced only through air.

"Your weapon is impressive," Abaddon said, shifting himself so I could see his fanged mouth, his dark skin and sharp red eyes. "I have not seen its like before."

"That's because you were trapped in the Box, like a chump," I said, focusing and leaping towards one of the walls, avoiding a

black blade that had shot from somewhere within his shroud. I bunched my feet against it and shot towards him, stabbing downwards where his head had been.

Except it wasn't there anymore. A leg came up at me, but I blocked it with the flat of the blade and spun myself over, landing on my feet. I jumped at him again, the Deliverer raised to strike from directly overhead.

He flowed out of the way like water, and a claw came out and caught me in the chest, holding me impaled. I coughed on blood filling my lungs, but turned the blade and lashed out at him anyway. He let me go, sidestepping the weapon.

"It has been so long since anyone has challenged me like this," he said. "It's an honor."

I wasn't expecting that. I brought the blade up and deflected two more strikes, and then went back on the offensive. I could never seem to get close, his dark, shrouded form slipping away as if it were carried by the wind.

"Just freaking die," I shouted, launching another flurry of thrusts and slashes, searching for him within the darkness.

He only laughed, and then clawed my face, sending me tumbling backward.

"One last true challenge before the end," he said, suddenly sounding tired. "Thank you, diuscrucis."

I couldn't see him, because he'd ripped out my eyes. I couldn't See him, because of the bracelet. I held the Deliverer in my hand, but I knew it was over, because he would kill me before I healed. We both knew it.

The bracelet. It wasn't doing anything to help me right now, but I couldn't pull it off without dropping the sword. Could I survive his power on my own for that long? I had no idea, but I needed to find out.

I let the hilt fall from my fingers, and reached over to the bracelet, ripping it from my wrist and dropping it. I focused, fighting against the despair and desperation, sure that he was right on top of me. I could feel the pressure against my soul, needling in to tear it apart.

I reached for the Deliverer again, but a clawed hand caught mine and held it. "I will enjoy the taste of your essence," Abaddon said. I could feel his breath against my face, and my eyes began to regain themselves.

Ten thousand years. At least I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. I got a blurry view of the demon's face right on top of mine, opening to literally eat my soul.

A gust of wind, a loud crunch, and Abaddon was gone.

I grabbed the sword and got up. Adam was laying against a wall, covered in blood. Abaddon was near him, getting back to his feet. I didn't waste any time.

"Sorry to be less than honorable," I said, grabbing his neck with my free hand. "But… you know." I brought the Deliverer forward, into empty air. "What the…?"

There was a dark spot on the ground, like a pool of spilled oil. The black tendrils of his power were retreating into it, condensing into a shrinking point of evil.

"He's retreating," Adam said. "Back to Hell."

The angel was still against the wall, and he looked completely dazed. He stared back at me with one eye open, the other with a gash over it, hissing from the demon's poison.

I ran over to him. "I guess it's your lucky day," I said, handing him the sword. As soon as he took it in his hand, the wound stopped sizzling, and began to heal.

He looked at the Deliverer, his eyes wide. "Amazing," he said, with reverence.

"Not that amazing," I replied. "It wasn't enough to stop Abaddon from kicking my ass."

"It wasn't designed to stop Abaddon," Adam said. "He had already been dealt with when the Blades were created. Lucifer poured so much power into him, we knew he wouldn't gift another like that."

I wanted to pick him up by the neck and punch him. "You couldn't have told me that before I challenged him to a duel?"

He chuckled. "That would have been entirely detrimental to your confidence."

I still wanted to punch him, but he had a point. Instead, I held out my hand and helped him to his feet. "You saved my life, again."

"You know what you can give me in return." He held the sword out to me. "Just not yet."

Except that was one promise I wouldn't be able to deliver on. The only question was - who was I lying to? I was glad I didn't have to decide that yet.

I went back to where Abaddon had knocked me down, picked up

the bracelet, and returned it to my wrist.

"We need to find Avriel, and be quick about it. The Beast knows we're here. If he knows Abaddon isn't anymore, he won't be a happy camper."

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We found him in the largest of the golden temples, naked and bound to the ground by chains. Runes ran up the length of them until they reached the manacles themselves, which were ordinary metal. He was filthy, covered in his own blood, which had been splattered around the room so often that it was nearly a dark red coat of paint on top of the floor. Spread out on either side of him, beyond his reach, were his wings, somehow shorn off without killing him.

I had my own anxiety about facing him, even before we had entered the temple. Seeing what the Beast and Abaddon had put him through, it took an extra helping of courage to continue forward.

"You."

That was all he said when he saw me. Despite what he had been through, he was defiant.

"Avriel," Adam said, going down to one knee. "We've come to save you, brother."

The archangel looked at him. "You've come to save me? Save

yourself, brother. Get away from this one before he breaks whatever promises he's made to you."

Adam turned to me, a questioning look in his eyes. I ignored it.

"Avriel," I said. "I'm sorry."

That was all I said. No excuses, no trying to weasel out of it. I had spent hours trying to think of a way to explain, but in the moment I knew there wasn't one. I got down on my knee and bowed my head, ready to take whatever he dished out.

There was silence for at least ten seconds. Finally, he let out a huff of air. "I felt the demon retreat. You came back for me, and you apologized with sincerity. The Lord would not approve if I could not find it in my soul to forgive you. Rise, diuscrucis, and help me get away from this place."

"*Well done, Landon* ," Josette said.

I got to my feet and walked over to the chains. A single stroke from the Deliverer not only snapped them, but made them disintegrate entirely. I pulled the manacles off with my bare hands.

"What manner of weapon is that?" Avriel asked. He rubbed his wrists as they began to heal. The wings stayed mangled on the floor.

"A weapon of the Lord," Adam said. "Created after your disappearance." He rose to his feet and approached the archangel, wrapping him in a hug. "I am honored."

"Thank you," Avriel said. He looked at his blood-soaked wings. "My days of flight are behind me it seems."

"Take the sword," I said, holding it out to him. "It will heal you."

He surprised me by shaking his head. "Let it be a reminder to us all. The value is in survival, not in lamenting our wounds."

"I can't get you out of here any other way," I said. "Adam can only carry one of us."

Avriel laughed. "Fear not for me, diuscrucis. The wings are for more local travel. Besides, we won't be alone for much longer."

Before I could ask him what he meant, sixteen seraph charged into the temple, organizing in a circle around us. I didn't need to ask who all of them were; I already knew. The Inquisitors, and their backup.

"Adam." A woman stepped forward, with long wavy blonde hair and an equally long face. She was a little bit pudgy, a little bit butch, and she exuded power.

“Kassie,” Adam said, dropping to his knee once more.

She turned to the archangel. “Avriel. It is an-“ That was when she noticed his wings, and all the blood. “What has been happening here?”

“Kassie,” I said, stepping towards her. “It’s-“

Her sword was out and headed towards me before I could finish my greeting. I brought the Deliverer up in plenty of time to block it, but I didn’t appreciate her attitude. When the swords met, hers cracked and crumbled to dust.

Her eyes grew wide. “Is that?”

“The Deliverer,” Adam said. “But why did it just shatter your blade?”

Kassie didn’t say anything. She looked at the other assembled angels. Then her face changed.

“Darn,” the Beast said. “You got me.” A small demonic dagger appeared in his hand, and he lunged at Avriel.

The archangel didn’t flinch. He put his hand out and caught the Beast’s wrist, twisting and breaking it with ease.

“Ouch,” the Beast said, his other hand coming around in a fist and slamming into Avriel’s face. The archangel fell backward.

I rushed to help him, but everything erupted in chaos, with the Beast’s servants turning on the loyal angels. “Adam,” I shouted, getting the angel’s attention. I threw him the Deliverer, and shifted.

He caught the blade and turned, just in time to block one of the angel’s attacks. As had happened with Kassie, the sword shattered when it came into contact with the Canaan Blade. The seraph tried to back away, but Adam caught him with the tip of the Deliverer, and it tore through him, the wound opening with a blinding white light. The seraph didn’t turn to ash. He vanished.

I heard an angel try to sneak up behind me, and I leaned on my hands and kicked back with Ulnyx’s powerful hinds, feeling claws ripping through flesh and sending the angel flying. Then I brought the legs back in and used them to spring towards another of the now-fallen Inquisitors, grabbing his neck in my jaws as his blade smacked into my side. I didn’t even notice such a puny wound, and I took a sick pleasure in feeling the crunch of his spine in my teeth.

“*Not bad* ,” Ulnyx said. “*You’re getting better at being me every time you shift* .”

The statement made me catch myself. It was too easy to be corrupted by the Great Were’s power if I didn’t keep myself

grounded. I turned and looked for Avriel, finding him still going hand-to-hand with the Beast. He was more than holding his own, and had managed to knock the dagger from his hand.

"Getting sick of losing yet?" I asked the Beast, coming up from behind and grabbing him. Avriel might have been able to kick the crap out of the host all day, but without a weapon all the damage would just heal.

"Who says I'm losing?" He twisted in my grip, trying to turn around. I focused and tightened it, keeping him straight.

"You're down one Abaddon. I've got the Box and Avriel. I've got Sarah. I've got a bracelet that hides my location from you, and I've even got a pretty sweet sword. Where exactly are you coming out ahead?" I brought my forearm around his neck. He grabbed it and fought against the motion, knowing that I was getting in position to break it.

Somehow, he managed to slip the move, ducking his head under my arm, turning and elbowing me in the stomach. He followed up with a punch that launched me across the room.

"You don't have Avriel yet," he said. He held out his hand, and the knife flew into it. Avriel was coming at him, ready for another round. He turned in one smooth motion, and the dagger launched from his hand and pierced the archangel's heart. "I just wanted you to think you were winning, so it would hurt more when I did this." He motioned with his hand, and Avriel's entire torso collapsed inward on the dagger. His expression was one of surprise, and then he fell to ash.

"The Divine aren't the only ones who know how to channel power with symbols," he said, laughing. "Let's see how well Avriel's Box works for you without Avriel."

I didn't say anything. I just stared at the pile of dust that used to be Avriel the Just. I could hear Josette crying in the back of my soul, and I could even feel the shock of the Were at the sudden turn of events. I felt sick to my stomach, the hope and despair pouring in as though Abaddon were still standing right outside the door. All the while, the Beast laughed.

"Keep underestimating me, kid," he said. "I'll find out where you've got Sarah stashed sooner or later. I know it's somewhere in New York, thanks to the hours this sack of feathers I'm wearing spent chasing around after your sidekick. I'm just glad she came in useful after all. She was almost as much of a loser as you."

He smiled his stupid smile, and left her body.

I walked over to Avriel and knelt down over the ashes, my eyes threatening to fill with tears, my heart ready to burst. I heard footsteps, and looked back. Adam was approaching, along with five other seraph.

"Using the sword told the angels where I was," I said. "It's all the Beast needed." I turned back to the ashes. "He was our only hope."

Adam put a hand on my shoulder. "We'll figure something out. The Inquisitors are with you. What's left of us, anyway."

It didn't bring me any comfort. "We need to go back to the church, and meet up with the others. We need to tell them what happened. I don't know if we can recover from this one. Even Malize thought Avriel was the only one who could make the Box strong enough to keep the Beast contained. Without him? I just don't know."

I stood up and faced the other angels. There were two men and three women, of varying ages and features. They all looked upset at the loss of the archangel.

"Do you believe in the Beast now?" I asked them.

"We do, Landon," Adam said.

"This fight isn't about Heaven and Hell. It's about survival. For all of us. Can you abide by that? Because I can tell you right now, you *will* have to fight side by side with demons if we're going to take him out."

The angels weren't happy about that, but they didn't argue.

"We'll do what we must," one of the women said. She was dark-skinned, and spoke with a thick Haitian accent.

"Which of you is the First?"

The same woman stepped forward. "I am. I speak for the Inquisitors. We will help you however we can."

"Can you get us some more angels?" I asked.

She smiled. "We can try."

I held out my hand, motioning for Adam to give me the Deliverer. Joe was going to do his best to kill me for this, but Adam handed the sword to me, and I handed it to the woman.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Fredeline." She gazed at the Deliverer, holding it with reverence.

"Fredeline, it appears the Deliverer will tell you who is true, and

who is a servant. Use it to root out the faithful, the ones that are willing to join you."

She brought the blade to her lips and kissed it. "I will," she said. "Starting with my own." She brought the sword to each of the remaining angels. Each of them put their lips to the sword, including Adam.

"This is a temporary truce, diuscrucis," she said. "Once the Beast is taken care of, it will be business as usual."

Somehow, I doubted anything would be usual once this was done, but I nodded.

"Then we will take our leave of you," Fredeline said. "Adam, stay with Landon. He needs someone to keep him out of trouble."

Adam bowed to her, and the angels left the temple.

"Why didn't they turn to ash?" I asked him, seeing that Avriel's wings were still lying on the floor.

"He rejected them," Adam said. "The wings don't make us what we are. Our faith does."

I knew there was a deeper meaning somewhere in there, but I wasn't in the mood to look for it. The Beast had won this round, and negated every other victory we had scored along with it. It was a challenge to keep my head up and keep fighting, but I knew the stakes.

"To the bat-cave, then," I said, the humor feeling flat, and falling flat.

We walked out of the temple, and Adam tucked his arms under my shoulders.

I didn't even notice the flight.

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“What are we going to do?” Sarah asked.

We were all gathered in the nave of the church, after having forced a reluctant Father Tom to close it off to worshippers. I hated to ask him to do it, but the church was the only place we had that felt somewhat safe. Rebecca’s place under the Statue of Liberty may have been a viable alternative, but it was too hard to get into and out of. Still, he had submit without complaint, after I gave him the short version about what had happened to Avriel. He had been crushed to hear about the death of an archangel, and had retreated to his office and locked the door.

“I feel like the 2006 Yankees,” Obi said. “Up three games to none, looking like a lock for the Series, and then pow! Sox kick our ass.”

“Maybe we’re the Red Sox?” Adam suggested. “Down, but not out.”

“We need to find someone who can understand Avriel’s work,” I said. “His design. Malize said there’s a lot of math involved, so maybe we just need Stephen Hawking or something.”

Obi huffed. “Man, it takes him an hour to say one sentence. How long would it take him to tell us how to alter the Box?”

“I’m open to suggestions,” I replied. “Come on guys, we’ve got negative time to find a solution.”

“Landon, do you remember when we met at the tower in Thailand?” Charis asked. “I told you I might know someone who knew about the Box?”

I did remember. I tried to think of who she was referring to, but she knew too many people to cherry pick one of them from her memories. “Yeah, but if your source is reliable, why didn’t you push him on us earlier?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t say he was reliable. I just said he might know about the Box. He’s more of a last resort.”

“Which is where we’re at,” Obi said.

“Sad, but true,” I agreed. “Who is he?”

“He’s a demon. I think Dante knows him. His name is Alichino.”

“It doesn’t ring a bell,” I said.

“His name means harlequin. He used to serve in Hell, but he got kicked out and sent back to Earth for allowing someone to escape their torture.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a punishment,” Obi said.

“For a demon who was created in Hell, and wants to stay in Hell, Earth is the worst punishment there is.”

Obi huffed again.

“Okay,” I said. “So, where do we find him, and why do you think he can help us with the Box?”

“Brazil. I’m not sure he can help us with the Box, but I know he was obsessed with it. He always wanted to be the one to find it and free Abaddon. He was hoping that Lucifer would be so grateful, he would let him go back to Hell.”

“Is he good at math?” I asked.

Charis nodded. “He claims that he can prove the Euler-Mascheroni constant is irrational.”

“Whatever that means,” Obi and I both said in unison.

“We’ve got to go find this Alichino. Melody?”

The angel had been quiet during the conversation. She had taken the news about Kassie in stride, but she looked pissed that she hadn’t guessed at her true allegiance. “Yes, Landon?”

“Can you go find Fredeline, and stick with her? She’ll need someone to lead her to us when we’re ready for them to join the

fun."

She got to her feet and nodded, walking over to Obi and kissing him on the cheek. "See you around, mate," she said with a smile.

"Don't be long," Obi replied.

She winked at him, and headed out of the church.

"O-"

"Don't even tell me I'm not coming," Obi said.

There was a rift in Brazil. "Fine, you're in. Charis, you too. We need Vilya to get us there."

"I want to come," Sarah said.

"No," I said. "I'm sorry. I wish you could, but you're safer here. The Beast is stepping up his game, and we need to stay focused on the task, not on protecting you."

She frowned, but stayed quiet.

"Besides," Charis said. "We need to stay inconspicuous. We can't do that trailing a big entourage."

"Which is why you want Thomas and I to stay here?" Adam asked.

I nodded. "Hold down the fort. With any luck we won't be gone more than an hour or two."

"The First asked me to keep an eye on you," Adam reminded me.

"If she stops by, tell her I'm in the bathroom. Izak, can you come unlock the door for us?"

The demon stood up and followed us as we descended the stairs into the church basement. He knelt down in front of the rift and used his good hand to scratch out the runes to connect this one to the one in Brazil. He did it fast, almost impatiently, and started walking away as soon as it flared to life.

"Thanks, Izak," I said.

He waved his hand at me and left.

"He's in a good mood," Obi said.

"You wouldn't be too happy if you lost your hand," I said.

"True."

"Are you boys ready?" Charis asked.

Obi shrugged and walked in. We followed behind him.

"Where are we?" I asked. We had stepped out into a small room encased in stone, with a metal door at the north end. "No, wait. Let me guess." I knew a little bit about Brazil. "Christ the Redeemer, in Rio?"

“You’re getting good at this,” Charis said.

“Whoa, hold on.” Obi pointed up at the ceiling. “There’s a demon rift under a huge statue of Jesus Christ?”

“It’s under the chapel too,” Charis replied. “Look, I didn’t put it here. Alichino might have. He has an irreverent sense of humor.”

“He’s a demon. Doesn’t that just come with the territory?” Obi asked.

“You asked,” Charis said.

“Touche,” Obi replied.

“So, how to we find Alichino?”

The door swung open. A small demon stood there. He was three feet tall, with a long snout and leather skin, the left half of which was black, the other half white. He was wearing a pair of tight lycra bicycle shorts and Pumas, and holding a thick book under a spindly arm.

“You don’t find Alichino, diuscrucis. Alichino finds you.”

I laughed. Could it actually be this easy? “You knew-“

“No,” he said, before I could finish. “Well, yes. But, no. Dante looked me up and asked me if I could help you. Me and him go way back. You have the Box?”

Charis took it from a purse at her hip. When the demon saw it, his eyes lit up.

“Wow. You really do have it?” He scampered over, reaching for the artifact.

Charis pulled it away. “Hold on. You don’t get to touch it until you agree to help us. In blood.”

He snorted. “My word isn’t good enough for you? Even if Dante vouches for me?”

“You have a reputation,” she said.

His laugh sounded like a chainsaw. “Okay, fine.” He reached down and produced a small knife from his sneakers. “I promise to help you with whatever you need me to do with the Box. In exchange, you’ll get me back to Hell.” He cut his finger and held it up.

Charis looked at me, and then took the knife. She cut her finger, and put it to his. “I promise we’ll do our best to get you back to Hell, in exchange for helping us with the Box.”

I hadn’t made the agreement, so I didn’t feel the pressure of the binding, but I knew Charis would. Alichino laughed again and reached for the Box once more. Charis handed it to him.

“Amazing,” he said, turning it over and over in his three-fingered hand. “Do you see these lines?” He traced some of the angel scripture in a fine pattern. “The calculations to reach this kind of simple complexity are beyond insane.”

“So, you understand it?” I asked.

He flicked his head towards me. “I’ve been studying everything I could about Avriel’s Box since the day that bastard Bonturo tricked me. I know you guys don’t like Abaddon much, but he could have sent me back just by touching me and willing it. Anyway, yeah I understand it. I learned to read the seraphim scripture so I could reverse engineer the calculus. The best mortal nerds would have an orgasm if they could read the source code.”

“Wow, nice choice of words,” Obi said.

Alichino laughed again. “Yeah, I knew Avriel got trapped in there, even if nobody else did. Well, until they let him out I guess.” He held up his book. “I can show you the math if you want.”

“How about summarizing?” I said.

He looked disappointed. “Fine. He missed an exponent in the containment algorithm.”

“How about summarizing in English?” Obi asked.

Alichino rolled his eyes. “Look, you want to keep something behind an electrified fence, you need to make sure you have enough juice to power the whole fence, right? You don’t cover the whole fence, it’s all useless. Are you following me?”

“He didn’t have enough charge for the fence?” Obi said.

“Exactly. He fed his power into the Box, but not enough. He had two choices then. One, give up and let Abaddon keep eating everything. Two, give it more power. The only way he could satisfy the equation was to feed himself to the Box with Abaddon. Bada-bing, bada-boom, he’s stuck inside.”

“Fine,” I said. “We already know most of this. The question is, how do we feed it enough power to trap the Beast inside, and hold him?”

The demon stopped laughing, and looked at me. “Are you serious?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Look, there’s some fuzzy math to calculate the power of a demon, or an angel. Leave enough wiggle room over the top, and you’re good to go. There’s no way to quantitate the power of that thing.”

“We have it on good authority that it can be done,” Charis said. “We can up the innate ‘charge’ by converting the seraphim scripture to the Templar language.”

“Templar?” he asked.

“The original writing of the first children of God,” she replied. “If the Divine symbols were solar panels, Templar script is the most efficient at conversion.”

“Ooh,” Alichino said. “That sounds exciting.”

“I’ll teach it to you. Then you need to figure out how to use it to maximize the charge.”

The demon squealed with delight. “What are we waiting for?” he asked.

As soon as we were back in the church basement, Charis shooed us away so she could share what she knew with the demon. It wasn’t that we couldn’t have stuck around if we wanted to; but who wanted to?

I found Sarah in the vestibule, kneeling in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. She had her hands clasped in prayer, her head down. I stood behind her and waited. There was nothing else to do. I knew she would know I was there.

After a few minutes, she lifted her head and stood up. “Hello, brother,” she said, turning to face me.

“Hey, kiddo,” I said. “I was just checking in with you. Making sure you’re okay.”

She smiled. “I’m good. Better than ever, believe it or not.”

“Not afraid of the end of the world?” I was.

“I have to make choices,” she said. “I can choose to believe that what I’ve seen is all that can be, or I can choose to believe we can change it.”

“What do you see?”

“It wouldn’t help you to know, any more than it helps me.”

Fair enough. “Do you still kill me?”

Just the slightest change in her face, and I knew that was still the future she saw. “Yes. I’m not going to let that happen.”

“I know you won’t,” I said. I wasn’t sure how much I believed it. If it came down to it, I would have to make sure she didn’t.

“How is mother?” she asked.

I smiled. “She’s fine,” I said, tapping on my head.

“When this is over, do you think I’ll be able to spend more time with her?”

“If I’m here, she’ll be here. You know how to get into my head, so I don’t see why not.”

She returned my smile, and then walked over to be and gave me a hug. “I love you, brother.”

I rubbed her back, my eyes fixed on the Mary statue behind her. “I love you, too.”

“Landon!”

I let Sarah go and turned my head. Thomas was running towards me.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He stopped and motioned for us to follow. “You’ve got to see this.”

We followed him out of the vestibule and around to the left, into the hallway that led to Father Tom’s office. The door was finally open again, and most of the crew had crowded around. I pushed my way in.

“What’s the panic?” I asked.

Father Tom was sitting in his chair, his face completely pale, a look of absolute fear written across it. There was a simple wooden box sitting on his desk now, an old AM radio.

“We’re getting reports of a civil war breaking out in the Indian city of Mumbai,” the voice on the radio was saying. “People on the scene say it is complete chaos in the streets, with civilians attacking one another across the city. According to our sources, the rioters are even going into apartments and attacking people in their homes. The exact cause of the unrest is unknown, but it has been reported that it started at a downtown restaurant, when two of the patrons got into an argument, and quickly escalated from there.”

I took a deep breath and looked around the room, at Father Tom, Sarah, Adam, Thomas, Izak, and Obi. “This is not good.” I felt a small twinge in my gut. The balance, beginning to slide. We were running out of time. Was the Beast going for the end zone, or trying to lure us out of hiding? “This is really not good.”

“What should we do?” Thomas asked.

I looked around the room at them. “We can’t do anything right now. We have to wait for Alichino.”

“Landon, there are people dying out there,” Obi said.

“I know,” I said. “There’s nothing we can do. The Beast is possessing them, making them attack one another. If we kill one, he’ll just take another, and another. Whether we take the lives or he

does, the end result is the same."

"We have to stop him," Adam said.

"How?" I asked. "Right now, we can't. Believe me, I know you want to do something. You aren't the ones who can feel the balance starting to-"

A pounding on the door of the church interrupted me. It wasn't a knock. It sounded like somebody was trying to break it down.

"Think they found us?" Obi asked.

"How?"

"They've been fighting out there for hours," Thomas said. "They've stayed mindful of the balance. I think they're done with that approach."

The pounding intensified.

"Izak, go cover the front door. Adam, take the east entrance. Thomas and Obi, you're on the west. I'm going to go check things out from the roof. We need to give Charis and Alichino time."

"What do you want me to do?" Sarah asked.

"Stay here. Izak, if you can't hold the front you need to get Sarah out through the rift." I tried to think of where. "Take her to Brazil, and stay there."

Izak nodded, and started towards the front of the Church. Thomas, Adam, and Obi headed off to take up their own positions, while Father Tom bowed his head in prayer.

I made my way down the hall. Opposite the stairs to the basement were the stairs to the belfry. I could hear Charis speaking to Alichino down the steps. She had to know the balance was shifting, but she was speaking with a sense of patience and calm. The demon was cooing at her explanations.

"*We're screwed,* " Ulnyx said as I scampered up the steps.

"*Whose side are you on?* " I asked him.

"*It looks like the wrong side.* "

The belfry was a small room, with the bell a dozen feet up in a small tower. I focused and jumped, reaching the tower and anchoring myself with my feet against both sides. I peeked out, and then ducked back in just in time to keep my head from being cut off by an angel. I heard the sound of Obi's Desert Eagle down below.

The seraph crouched down to find me inside the tower, and I wrapped my hand around his throat. I shifted my other hand to a claw, drove it through his chest, and then tossed him away. Before I could begin looking for the next target, I felt the heat of flames

headed towards me. I let myself drop, falling to the floor and dropping to my stomach as a gout of hellfire roared through the tower. It exploded in a mess of mortar and dust. I rolled out of the way just in time to keep the white-hot and melting bell from landing on me.

"Freaking fire demons," I said, getting to my feet. The whole building shook, and I knew it had landed on the roof.

I shifted, bunching my hinds and leaping to the gaping hole in the ceiling. I landed on the roof in front of the demon. It had a huge blade raised over its head, ready to bring it down into the church. A pair of angels stayed airborne behind it, letting it lead the assault.

I closed my eyes and focused, willing myself to be stronger, pushing the focus so hard I thought my head would explode.

The sword came down.

I caught it.

It was blazing with hellfire, but I had made the skin of my claws so tough that it couldn't penetrate, and I didn't feel it. Neither did I feel the bite of the edge. I heaved against the force, muscles flexing and threatening to pop, feet scratching along the roof to stay rooted. I focused even harder still, and pulled the huge blade from the demon's hands. It was way too big for me to wield it, but I had another option.

I pulled off the bracelet.

It was useless right now. Even if he didn't know where I was, he would soon enough. As soon as it had fallen down the hole into the church, I focused on the tremendous sword, pulling it around in a wide arc. The fire demon saw it coming, and it raised its arms to defend itself.

It needn't have bothered.

The blade went right through the demon's arms, and right through its neck, severing its head. It fell backward in the middle of a huge screech, one of its wings slamming into a waiting angel, the sharpness of it leaving a huge gash. The angel hadn't attacked yet, so he hadn't fallen. The demon's poison killed him before the demon had even hit the ground.

The bracelet gone, I focused on my Sight. I wished I hadn't.

If the church was an island, the enemy outside was the Pacific Ocean.

I jumped back into the hole, grabbed the bracelet, and ran downstairs. I scrambled out into the main part of the church. I

could see Obi with a knife in hand at the west entrance. The door had been blasted in, and a group of devils was trying to get past him. I found Thomas on the floor. He wasn't moving.

I turned around. Adam had drawn some kind of runes on the east door, and it seemed to be holding for now. He was on his knees in prayer.

"Adam!" I shouted. Obi needed help. He didn't respond. "Adam!"

He was ignoring me. I ran over to him. I was reaching for his shoulder when he stood and turned. "Sorry, Landon," he said. "I was just calling for backup."

"Backup?"

I felt a rush of air, and then Fredeline, the Inquisitors, and Melody came down the stairs from the hole in the roof. The First was carrying the Deliverer.

"It looks like you needed us sooner than you expected," she said on her way by.

She raised the blade and started yelling and running for the devils attacking Obi. It attracted their attention and his, and he watched dumbfounded while she tore into them with the sword. The devils in front crumbled to dust as the weapon dug into them, and those in the back started screaming and trying to run. She and the Inquisitors followed them out, while Melody stopped next to Obi.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Nah. It'll take more than those a-holes to put me down." He looked over to where Thomas was laying. His voice dropped to little more than a whisper. "We weren't all so lucky."

"Thanks," I said to Adam, before going over and kneeling down next to Thomas.

He was dead.

"I'm sorry," I said to his corpse, reaching out and pushing his eyes closed with my hand. He hadn't turned to dust, and I wasn't sure why. I guess Purgatorians didn't get such a clean end.

"*He died well* ," Josette said.

"*For once you said something I agree with* ," Ulnyx remarked.

It didn't make it any easier to take. I closed my eyes and grimaced, feeling the twisting of my gut from the balance continuing its slide. I closed my eyes and focused, using my Sight to

check on our situation. I could sense the line of Inquisitors outside, digging into the mass of enemies around us, led by Fredeline and the Canaan Blade.

"What now?" Obi asked.

When I opened my eyes, he was kneeling on the other side of Thomas, looking down on him with his fist to the fallen angel's heart.

"We need to hold out until Charis and the harlequin are done. I just hope that happens before the balance tips." I got to my feet. "I'm going to go check on Izak. Watch the stairs, they'll be coming through there next."

Obi gave me the thumbs up, and he and Melody joined Adam by the stairs up to the demolished belfry.

I moved through the nave and out the back doors to where Izak was sitting, cross-legged on the floor. He had scratched a bunch of demonic runes in front of the doors, and it looked like so far none of the other demons had tried to pass it.

"Having a nice rest?" I asked him.

He turned his head, and shrugged.

"Keep doing what you're doing," I said, starting to turn to go ask Charis for a time estimate. I felt a wave of heat blast towards me, and for a split-second I thought it was my Sight, but then the doors of the church exploded inward behind a blast of hellfire.

I dropped flat onto my stomach as the splintered wood and flames roared overhead, threatening to melt the skin right off my back. I could see Izak stretched out on the floor too, and he didn't look very happy. As the flames subsided, a new demon joined the party.

She was without a doubt the most attractive creature I had ever seen, with long, shining black hair, olive skin, and crystal eyes. She was wearing only slightly more than nothing, a sheer dress that only barely covered the important parts, that shimmered and changed colors as she moved, and gold bracelets that ran up perfectly shaped arms and legs.

She walked into the church, stepping onto Izak's runes. They exploded in another round of light and heat, the blast so strong I had to look away. When I turned my head back, the stone walls of the church had started reducing to slag, but the woman was still standing there, unharmed.

"Mephistopheles," she said. "It's been a long time. Still as

predictable as ever, I see."

He rose to his feet and stared at her. He wasn't impressed by her beauty. In fact, he looked like he wanted to rip her face off with his bare hands.

"And you are?" I asked. I could see a swarm of demons beyond her, and the glow of the Deliverer at its center. She didn't seem to care about the angels at her back.

"Ardat Lili," she said. Her voice was as sultry and appealing as her body. I could feel myself reacting, despite any of my best intentions.

"*Keep it calm, meat,* " Ulnyx said. "*It's a bunch of crap. She's a succubus. Actually, she's* the *succubus. The original that all the other designs are based on. He must have brought her out of Hell. She is something else, though.* "

Even with his warning, I could tell he was succumbing to her power too.

Izak wasn't. He charged towards her and threw a heavy punch. She slipped to the side, grabbed his arm, and planted her knee in his gut. Then she threw him backward, sending him sliding along the floor.

"Where is she?" she asked.

She had to mean Sarah. I swallowed, feeling my body building up to some kind of freakish ecstasy, and my tongue moving almost of its own volition, ready to tell her what she wanted to know.

"*Landon* ," Josette shouted.

It snapped me out of it. I reached for Ulnyx' power, to shift and go on the offensive. I found myself cut off.

"*Ulnyx?* "

"*So beautiful,* " the Were replied. "*I don't want to hurt her.* "

She started walking towards me, her hips rocking from side to side, every action causing an equal and opposite reaction. I swallowed again, fighting against the waves of attraction and passion that were pouring out of her.

"Where is she?" she asked again. "I'll make it very worth your while to tell me."

I felt my mouth moving again. Then another shot of hellfire slammed into her, knocking her away. It didn't burn her though. It just made her more sexy, the shadows of the flames enhancing every perfect curve.

"*Landon* ," Josette shouted again.

I shook my head to clear it. The succubus was on her back, smoke pouring off her. She started to get up. Izak walked towards her, his hand out, ready to launch another round of fire.

"Stop," she said to him, a Command so strong it almost made my ears pop. Izak stopped moving.

"*This is bad* ," I said to Josette.

"*He'd have to send a demon that could stand up to Izak,* " Josette replied.

"Mephistopheles, help me up."

He reached out with his good hand. She took it, and he pulled her up. She turned and looked at me, and I felt her power reaching out.

"*How do I stop her?* " I asked. I could feel my body reacting again, and my mind returning to its sexy woman mush state.

"*Let me in,* " she said.

She'd never asked to drive before, because unlike Ulnyx, she respected that my consciousness was mine. I gave it up to her easily, feeling the soul of her rising up and taking control.

The demon seemed to know it, as soon as it happened. "I can make it worth your while too, my innocent darling," she said. I could still feel her power. If Josette did too, she didn't show it. "No? Izak, kill them."

Izak took a step towards us.

"*How was this a good plan?* " I asked.

"Izak," Josette said. My lips moved, but the voice that came out was hers. "Izak, don't." The fiend paused.

Ardat Lili grabbed his shoulder, turned him and looked into his eyes.

"What?" she said. "You fell in love with an angel? You?"

"Izak," Josette said. "She wants to hurt me. She wants to take Sarah. You can't let that happen."

"No," the succubus said. "Mephistopheles, we have a past. You know what I can offer you. Kill her, kill the diuscrucis, and help me take the girl. I can give you everything you need, in his new universe."

Izak turned his head, looking back at us.

"Izak," Josette said. "You-"

Before she'd even finished speaking, the fiend's hand came up and wrapped around Ardat Lili's throat. He lifted her off the ground, while her eyes filled with fear.

“Izak, no,” she said, her voice little more than a croak. “Think of the pleasure.”

He smiled and nodded. He squeezed tighter, the palm of his hand igniting in hellfire as it sunk into her neck. She screamed in pain and anger, her body frantic to fight him off. He held on tight, pressing harder and harder, until she stopped moving.

He never let her go, and she turned to ash in his grip.

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We spent the next two hours trying to keep the Beast's forces from getting into the church and claiming Sarah. All the while, I could feel the balance twisting and rocking, like a glacier moving towards an inevitable end. It seemed as though the Beast had convinced half of Hell to join his cause, by the number of creatures that kept pouring into the area through an unseen rift, joining with a much smaller cadre of fallen angels. If it hadn't been for the Inquisitors and the Deliverer, I don't know that we would have lasted ten minutes.

We were still spread out at the different entrances, with Izak and I manning the gaping hole in the front of the church while Adam, Melody, and Obi took the rear. The angels roamed the streets, cutting a swath of destruction through the hordes, but it was all they could do to keep a small enough number from coming at the church that the rest of us could hold them back. I kept waiting for reinforcements from Heaven, or for the archangels to get themselves involved and the true meltdown to occur. It seemed they were willing to wait it out, as long as the balance didn't go too

far.

"Landon!" Charis and Alichino came running through the doors behind us. The demon had the Box in his hand. I knew from a glance it didn't look any different.

"Good news?" I asked. I was tired, dead tired, having spent more of my time in Ulynx's skin than I would ever have wanted to. It was an unfortunate side effect that using his power made me overly arrogant and lustful. I had to fight against the bad thoughts that seeing her put into my head.

"I haven't figured out the conversions yet, no," Alichino said. "But I have done some calculations on the energy output. There's a way we can pump enough strength into the Box to make it the most power dense prison ever constructed."

I liked the news. I didn't like the way he gave it.

"But?"

"You have to inject it with the Beast's own energy."

I put my arm up to block the sword of an incoming devil, then brought my claws around and severed its head. I would have thought after killing a couple hundred of them, that they would have tried a different tactic. It was no wonder Hell hadn't won this war yet, despite vast numbers.

"So we have to trick him into powering the box?"

"Not exactly," Charis said.

There was only one other source of the Beast's energy I knew of.

"We have to power it?"

"Yes," Alichino said. "Both of you. You need to mix his pure energy with that of the true diuscrucis. It has to be a balance of all of the forms. Based on my calculations, that should get you a ten thousand percent improvement over Avriel's original design."

I kicked a devil out of the way, and turned to him. "Did you say ten thousand?"

The demon hopped up and down, excited. "Yes. Impressive, no? It's a combination of the power source and the Templar script. I can show you the math downstairs if you'd like?"

"Just make it work," I said, looking at the Box. "You haven't changed anything."

"Landon," Charis said. "There's a catch."

Of course there was. There was always a catch. "What?"

"The Beast's power has to be pure. We need to find a way to empty our souls."

I shifted back to my human shape. “Izak, I need a few,” I said. He looked over at us and nodded as he put his hand to a hell hound’s forehead and crumbled it with a thought. I took Charis’ hand and pulled her back to the nave.

“When you say pure, you’re talking about-“

“Extraction,” she said. “We have to get our absorbed souls out.”

“Extraction isn’t possible.”

“*Lylyx said there was a djinn in Moscow,* ” Ulnyx said. “*If you can get me back into my own meat, I’d kiss you .*”

I didn’t know what to think, or how to react. I’d been carrying both the Were and Josette around with me for more than five years. I didn’t know if I would have lived any of those without the power they had brought. I couldn’t imagine what Charis was feeling. She’d had Vilya’s soul for longer than that.

“It has to be,” Alichino said. “There’s no other way. I can show you the math?”

I shook my head. “Lylyx said she had heard there was a djinn in Moscow who could do it. I don’t know where she heard it from, or how reliable the intel is, but that’s all I’ve got.”

“Then we go to Moscow,” Charis said. “The slimmest thread is the strongest we’ve got right now, and let’s face it - we can’t stay here.”

I had stuck Malize’s bracelet in my pocket. I pulled it out now, and put it back on. Charis followed my lead.

“Go set up the rift,” I said. “I need to round up the troops. It’s time to retreat.”

Charis and Alichino headed off to the basement. I ran back out to the front and got Izak’s attention. “When I come back, head for the basement. We’re getting out of here.”

He responded with a short nod. I looked through the hole in the front, finding the glow of the Deliverer in the distance. Then I ran to Father Tom’s office.

The priest was still at his desk, his head in his arms, a wet spot spreading from the arm of his vestment. He hadn’t stopped praying and crying since the fighting had started. Sarah was there too, her head straight forward, her body stiff. I imagined she was watching as much of the battle as she could through Izak’s eyes.

“Sarah,” I said. A slight tremor in her form, and then she turned her head.

“Get down to the basement. Charis and Alichino are there. We’re

leaving."

She got up and ran out the door.

I walked over to Father Tom, knelt down, and took his arm.

"Father, it's time to go. The demons are going to take the church."

He lifted his head and looked at me. His eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

"I could have been Touched," he said. "There was an angel once, she was such a beautiful lass. She offered to give me the power, because of my piety and faith. I turned her down. I said I couldn't continue to touch humanity with His word if I wasn't fully human myself. If I had been Touched, I think I could have saved this place."

I put my other hand on his back, and started lifting him from the chair. "You saved something a lot more important, Father," I said.

His eyes caught on mine. "Only if you win. Otherwise, we'll all be nothing more than a blip in time. A quickly forgotten blip in time."

The games of gods. It was a game I was determined to win. "Come with me," I said. Plain, old mortals couldn't go through the rifts, so I would need Adam to get him out of here.

I led him out into the nave, where Adam, Obi, and Melody were doing their best to hold off the hordes of demons pouring in from all sides. The altar of the church had been desecrated in the fighting, crucifix shredded by angry Hell spawn. I heard Father Tom gasp beside me, and I had to grab his arm to keep him standing.

"Time to go," I shouted from the back of the nave. Obi turned to acknowledge they had heard me. I couldn't help but wince when I saw the deep cut across his face. I couldn't be sure if his left eye was still functional or not beneath the torn flesh. "Adam, I need you."

The angel shoved his blade into a demon and hopped backward, his body launching the full length of the nave. He spun as he landed in front of me.

"What do you need?" he asked.

I pulled Father Tom forward. "You need to get him to safety. Then, find Fredeline and tell her to bail. This isn't the fight we need to worry about right now. If you can get to Mumbai and scout the place out, great. Otherwise, meet us in Moscow. Oh, and see if you can get me a sword." If we managed to find a way to extract Ulnyx,

I was going to need one.

He nodded, and took hold of Father Tom's shoulder. "Come with me, Father," he said, his voice gentle as he Calmed the priest. Father Tom followed without complaint, out to the stairs and up towards the hole in the church's roof. He had to fight through a few demons to get there, but he dispatched them without trouble.

I ran back out of the nave to the front of the church. Izak had retreated closer to the doors. "Come on," I said. He backed out with me, and we met up with Obi and Melody near the stairs.

The demons were still pouring into the building, overrunning the spaces we abandoned. I'd never imagined how much force they could actually bring to bear, if they had enough of a motivation to work together to do it. That none of the archfiends could manage the singular sense of purpose that the Beast had told me a lot.

"I can heal that, when we have a minute," I said to Obi when we reached the bottom of the stairs. Izak took up the rear, and held the flood of Hell from reaching us.

He wiped some blood away with his hand. "Just the eye would be good enough. A scar might be sexy."

"You don't need a scar to be sexy, mate," Melody said.

I looked to the back of the room. The rift was awash with hellfire. "Go. Now," I said.

Alichino went first, followed by Charis and Sarah, and then Obi and Melody. I tapped Izak on the shoulder, and motioned at the rift. We both made a run for it, and went through one behind the other.

A few demons managed to get through the rift before Charis could disconnect it. They didn't last long.

"First stop, Moscow," Alichino said, giggling.

"You think this is funny?" Obi asked, headed for the demon.

I put my hand up in front of him. "Let it go, Obi," I said.

He growled under his breath, and then lowered his guard. "So, what are we doing here?" he asked.

"We need to look for a djinn," Charis said. "That's all we know."

"Seriously?" Sarah said. "Do the words needle and haystack mean anything to you?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I said, stepping into the middle of the gang. "Everybody take a deep breath and chill out." I felt the balance in my soul, resting on a cliff and inching towards the ten-million-mile drop with every passing second. "We're all on the same side. Let's get our crap together and come up with a plan."

“Okay,” Obi said, sucking in a mass of air with his nose, and blowing it out through mauled lips. “That hurts.”

I put my hand to his face and closed my eyes, focusing on my palm, and his skin beneath it. I felt for the damage, and willed it to repair, demanding it to put itself back together. The act left me short of breath, but within a minute his face was as good as new.

“Thanks, man,” he said, reaching up and rubbing the new, pink, skin. “You forgot to leave the scar.”

“Shut up,“ I replied.

I needed some recharge time. Looking around, we all needed some recharge time. None of us were going to get it.

“So, how do we find a djinn?” I asked. Between everyone present, we had to have nearly three thousand years of experience to go on.

“Djinn are shape-shifters,” Charis said. “They can be anyone, anywhere.”

“Are they good or bad?” I asked.

“*Nobody knows* ,” Ulnyx said. “*Neither side wants to claim them.* ”

“What do you mean nobody wants to claim them?” I said it out loud, so the others would know I was talking to myself.

“*Nobody likes to talk about the djinn* ,” Josette said. “*They live like mortals, though with a much longer lifespan, but they have Divine power. Some have said that God created the djinn to keep an eye on humanity, because the angels were too busy with the demons. Others have said that Lucifer created the djinn to cause trouble for God’s creation.* ”

“What do you think?”

“*I think it doesn’t matter. We just need to find the one that supposedly lives here.* ”

“If somebody heard the djinn could do extractions, then somebody must know how to find him,” Melody said. “Who in Moscow would be that somebody?”

I knew the answer. So did Charis. There was an archfiend in Moscow, a ruthless, cold, violent, and powerful woman who went by the name of Darya. She wasn’t the most gifted with demonic runes, hellfire, or even personal combat, but in some ways that made her more of a challenge to deal with. She had risen to power through fear, intimidation, and manipulation, and held a tight grip over one of the most powerful vampire clans on Earth, as well as a pretty nasty pack of weres. The good news was that I knew where

to find her.

"Darya," I said. "She should have a lead on any Divine stalking around the city, and probably anywhere in the former Soviet Republic."

"Great," Obi said. "Where do we find her?"

"*We* don't find her anywhere," I said. "I don't know about the rest of you, but my tank is getting low, and I'd rather avoid another confrontation right now. Charis and I will go talk to her, and see what we can find out. The rest of you should go to Mickey D's or something."

Obi sighed. "Yeah, I guess the whole lot of us headed for her HQ wouldn't make the right impression." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell. "Who wants Starbucks?"

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Charis and I split with the rest of the gang a few blocks before we reached the Stolnik building, leaving them to follow Obi to a nearby Starbucks. It was a shorter, older building that had been renovated recently to put a penthouse on the roof, a massive apartment that spanned the entire length and width of the building, complete with a pool, a yard, and, oddly enough, palm trees. The apartment had been paid for by a local architecture company, a front for the Stolyev family, a massive and far-ranging cadre of vampires who had been subjugated by the archfiend.

"How are you feeling?" I asked her, as we treaded the block up to the building. I couldn't throw my Sight out to check on the number of demons hanging out around us, so I was a little more tense than normal.

"Tired," she replied. "And a little apprehensive. Vilya and I have been together for some time. She gave herself up in Hell to be with me. Let's say we find the djinn, and he can do the extraction. What's going to happen to her?"

"We find her a body to take over," I said. "That's how the whole

thing usually works." Ulnyx had tried to absorb my soul, and take my body after I destroyed his. He hadn't known what I was, and had been caught off-guard, allowing me to turn the tables on him.

Charis stopped walking and looked at me. "I know we can but… she defied Lucifer by helping me escape. Can you imagine what will happen if we stop the Beast, and the demons find out she's vulnerable?"

"You can still protect her."

"It's not the same, and you know it."

"I'm sorry," I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. "We don't have a choice."

She nodded. "I know. You asked me how I was feeling. That's it. Neither one of us likes it, but we'll do what we have to. Even if the outcome is scary, the Beast winning this thing is much worse."

We kept walking until we reached the entrance to the Stolnik building. There was a doorman standing outside, and a second man in a black suit standing behind him. I didn't need my Sight to know he was a vampire.

"Good afternoon," the doorman said as we approached.

"Good afternoon," I replied. I looked over at the vampire and motioned for him to join us as we entered the lobby.

He was short, but well-muscled, with cropped black hair and a thick face. "Diuscrucis," he said. "I hadn't heard the Mistress was expecting you. Either of you."

"She isn't," I replied. "We need to talk to her. To ask a favor, actually."

He smiled. "You need a favor? One moment." He leaned away, reaching into the top of his shirt for the small microphone that would allow him to communicate with the security upstairs. "The Mistress will see you, on the condition that you make the deal in blood that you will come and go without a fight. She doesn't want to waste so many of us stopping you."

Of course, she would never tell her subjects she was afraid of what the two of us together could do to her and her goons. She also didn't know we'd lost a bit of our mojo since then, and that our worn state had reduced the juice further. I don't know if we could have taken her if we needed to. I didn't want to find out. I shifted my right index finger into a thick claw, and used it to slice open my left thumb, and then Charis' left thumb. The vampire cut himself on a tooth, and we pressed our thumbs together.

“Deal,” Charis and I both said. I felt the weight of the binding. It wasn’t that strong, but it was an act of good faith that would put the archfiend at ease.

The vampire led us over to an elevator, separate from the rest. “It will take you straight up,” he said when the doors opened. We stepped in, and went up.

We ascended to the penthouse, and the elevator doors parted to reveal a huge, open living space. It had lots of white leather furniture, some rare artwork, ancient Chinese vases, and some strange apparatus hanging from the ceiling. Attached to the chains and leather were two female vampires, both in skimpy leather something or others, their backs raw and bleeding.

Darya stepped out from in front of them to greet us. She was an ugly one, with features too large for her head, straw-like black hair, and a gaunt frame that made everything on her face look even bigger. She was wearing a simple white frock, and red stiletto heels.

“Charis, I thought you were on our side?” she reached up and unclasped the two vampires. “Go get cleaned up,” she Commanded. They rushed off to another part of the apartment.

“I’m on my own side,” she replied. “And Landon’s.”

Darya’s smile was crooked. “So the Demon Queen is who now, I wonder?”

The question made me wonder too. It had been Charis, but that had been while her allegiance had trended evil. Then it was Rebecca, but she was dead. I imagine Ardat Lili could have made a claim, but she hadn’t survived either. “Maybe it’s you?” I said. “Although, I don’t know if you want the title. Demon Queens don’t seem to have much of a future lately.”

She laughed. “Too true. Especially with the Beast making a mess of things.”

“You know about the Beast?” Charis asked.

“I’ve heard the news reports, and I’ve been in touch with some lesser demons from New York who told me about a massive battle over a church. A church that you were supposed to be holed up in.”

“We had to abandon ship,” I said. “Anyway, the million dollar question is, where do you stand with the Beast?”

“Do you mean am I a servant?” She scowled. “I serve none but myself, and the Beast is threatening to ruin my lifestyle. Why do you think I let you up?”

“What do you know about a djinn who’s been rumored to be

hanging out in the city?" I asked.

"More than a little," she replied. "What is it worth to you?"

It was my turn to smile. "I think a better question is, what is it worth to you? That djinn may be our only chance of stopping the Beast from ruining your lifestyle."

She pursed her lips. "That is an enticing offer," she said. "I'll tell you what. You make a deal with me, in blood, that you'll leave me to control Moscow and its surrounds, unimpeded, for a hundred years, and I'll tell you everything I know."

"I'll give you one hundred years, if you promise not to reach outside of your area for more power. Plus, I want fifty of your best fighters."

"You're bargaining for my vampires?"

"And your weres. The djinn is useless if we can't get close to the Beast. If you've heard the news, you know he'll have a possessed army in the thousands by the time we go after him."

"Fifty won't be near enough to help you with that," she said.

"It will keep them busy. The possessed are mortal after all. Still, you're probably right. Let's make it a hundred years, for a hundred vampires and weres, plus everything you know about the djinn."

She looked down at her feet, and ground her stiletto into the floor while she thought. "Fine," she said at last. "I'll have them meet you at the rift in one hour."

She reached out with a finger and used her nail to slice open her arm. I cut my thumb again, and pressed it to her. "Deal," I said. The weight of it was heavier this time.

"His name is Kafrit. He's been in Moscow since Stalin was running the place, though he doesn't like to talk about those days. Before that, he spent a thousand years in Iran. You can usually find him in Solntsevo, running with the Brotherhood. He likes the high-stakes games they play, and the men they can provide him. When he's laying low, he usually takes the form of a big black dog."

"Do you know about the rumors?"

"You mean soul extraction? I've heard he can do it, but I've never seen it done. Angels don't take souls, and demons never want to give up the power they've gained willingly. You'd want to part with the power of the Great Were?"

I didn't really, at least not while we still had the Beast to stand up against, but I had no choice. "It's complicated," I said. "Lots of math."

She laughed. “Tell the Brotherhood that Darya sent you. It will make things easier.”

“On us, or on them?” Charis asked.

She didn’t answer. “Unless you’d like to stay and take a turn in the machine with me, I believe our business is done.” She motioned to the chains hanging from the ceiling.

“I think we’re done,” I said. “Remember the deal. One hour.”

“You remember the deal, diuscrucis. One hundred years. Not a second less… But maybe a little more.” She laughed, and walked away, headed in the same direction the vampires had gone.

“So, Solntsevo it is,” I said. “Let’s go get Obi so he can Google it for us.”

Charis nodded. I could see the apprehensiveness return to her expression. I put my hand on her face.

“It’ll be okay,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

She put her hand over mine and gave me a forced smile. “Thanks for trying,” she said.

We made our way back to the elevator, and out onto the street. Obi had given me directions to the Starbucks from our current location, and I traced them in my mind as we walked, hoping I got them right. I was pleased when the little green mermaid-circle came into view.

They were all sitting around a table, paper cups spread among them. Alichino was in the corner, looking impatient.

“It’s about time,” he said when he saw us. He hopped over the table. “I don’t know how you stand this stuff. It tastes like somebody took one of my craps and let it soak in hot water for a while.”

“Awww, man,” Obi said. “That’s disgusting.”

The demon turned and picked up Obi’s extra-syrup, extra-espresso latte. “This is disgusting.”

“Nectar of the gods, man,” he said, taking it from Alichino and downing the last swallow.

“I doubt that.”

“Did you find him?” Sarah asked.

“We have a lead,” I said. “We need to get to Solntsevo. Obi, can you look it up?”

He took out his phone and started putting it in. “Twenty-four kilos,” he said. “We’re gonna need a van or something.”

I turned and headed outside. There was a UPS truck stopped

across the street. I ducked my head back in. “I found a ride.”

We piled in, with Obi taking the wheel. The driver came out of the office across the street just in time to watch us pull way. I felt kind of bad for the guy. Sarah thought it was hilarious.

“Did you see his face?” she asked.

I let her have her laugh. The opportunities were few and far between as it was.

It was about an hour to the small city, a city that I had expected to look a little more slummy, based on Darya’s description of its inhabitants. I was surprised to find it reminded me of pretty much anywhere in the developed world. Sure, it had its older apartment buildings, its warehouses, and its seedy looking characters, but so did New York.

“An hour drive, great,” Obi said. “We need to make this quick, man. How many people do you think the Beast can have kill each other in an hour?”

I had felt the balance sliding. Mumbai was big, but it was still only a fraction of the world population. It would take more than one city to trip the wire. At the same time, India as a whole had a lot of people, and the Beast’s power was like a virus, spreading from soul to soul until it had covered the earth. It’s speed would increase with each passing minute.

“That’s an interesting question,” Alichino said. “If you-“

“Spare us,” Obi said.

“There’s only one way to do this,” I said. “Stop the truck.”

They all looked at me curiously, but Obi pulled the truck to a stop. I hopped down and took a deep breath, focusing on strengthening my lungs.

“Kafriiiiittttttt,” I shouted, as loud as I could. It was loud enough that the mortals who couldn’t register my existence in their minds all stopped, dead silent, and looked around for it’s source. I waited, and then shouted again.

Within a few minutes, a few muscle-bound guys in black cargos and gray vests turned up. Fiends.

“Hey guys,” I said.

The looked at me, confused. There were still a few demons out there who didn’t know about me, I guess.

“Do you know Kafrit? I need to talk to him.”

“What do you want with Kafrit?” the biggest one asked. He was almost big enough to put Ulnyx’s Were form to shame.

“Extraction,” I said.

He looked at his two buddies, and charged me.

I only had two seconds to react, so I focused and leaped, up and over the raging bull, coming down on the other side, between his friends. They reached out for me, and I planted an enhanced fist in each of their faces, sending them sprawling. The big one turned and came back at me, throwing a heavy fist towards my gut. I caught it, and tossed him to the ground too.

“Kafrit?” I asked again. They all regained their feet, while the rest of the gang rushed over. When the three fiends noticed them, they put up their hands.

“He doesn’t want to see anyone,” the big one said.

“Does he want to continue walking the Earth? Gambling, whoring, all of that good stuff? Because it’s all going to end, if he doesn’t see us.”

He tightened his jaw and narrowed his eyes. “One second,” he said, turning around. He whispered something to his boys, and turned back. “He’ll see you.”

I was expecting the big guy to be Kafrit. I had been since they had shown up. It wasn’t, though. Kafrit was goon number two. He stepped forward and shifted into a small, thin man with olive skin and a slight goatee.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said, with a deep bow. “And you are?”

“Landon,” I said, holding out my hand. He smiled and took it.

“Not *the* Landon?”

I hadn’t realized I’d earned a ‘the’. “The same.”

“Well, what is the world coming to that has brought a boy like yourself to my doorstep, and I’ve shown such poor manners.” He motioned towards a building across the street. “Come,” he said. He turned to the rest of my entourage. “Come. Delight in the hospitality of Kafrit Al Niraj, Efreeti Especiale.” He started walking towards the building, his men close behind.

“I like this guy,” I heard Alichino say as we followed.

He walked right into a stark apartment building that had seen better days, leading us to the stairs down, where there was a casino in full swing. He brought us through, past the mortals that couldn’t see anyone but him, to a private room with a poker table and a bar.

“A drink?” he asked, wiggling his fingers. It must have been a signal, because the big guy went up to the bar and started mixing a

drink. He motioned for us to sit around the table.

"Do you have blue curaçao?" Alichino asked. "I love that stuff."

I glared at the demon, who shrank to the back of the line. "I appreciate your hospitality, Kafrit," I said. "We have about four hours to stop the end of the world."

"So, right down to business, eh? You hurt a humble djinn's feelings." He pouted, until the big guy handed him his drink. It was some kind of martini, and he sipped it gingerly.

"I'd rather stay and play," I lied, "but the end of the world won't wait."

He sighed loudly. "No, I suppose it won't. You want to know if I can extract the souls you have inside of you, right?"

I nodded. "Can you?"

"I can," he said. "Only a djinn can, because it requires a very light touch, and an almost neutral power. I've done it twice before. You should know, there is a chance you'll die."

"We're as good as dead if we don't. Two from me, one from Charis."

He looked over at Charis, focusing on her red eyes. "If you want the souls to survive, they'll need another body. Did you bring any prisoners in that truck of yours?"

I paused. It wasn't that I hadn't considered it, but we'd been in such a rush I hadn't thought to bargain for replacement flesh from Darya. "No."

He laughed. "I can help you there, for a price," he said. "And I can do the extraction, for a price."

Desperation was leading to a lot of bad debt. What was a little more? "Name it," I said.

He shook his head. "I need more time," he said. "An opportunity like this only comes once in a lifetime."

"Kafrit."

He waved his hand. "I will do the extraction, but you owe me one boon. A price you will pay at the time I ask for it."

It wasn't like I had a whole lot of choice. "Two conditions. One, no sexual favors. Two, nothing that will tip the balance."

He laughed. "You just ruined one of my ideas, but as you wish." He held out his hand. As I reached for it, he drew it back. "Remember, diuscrucis. I am not an angel, or a demon. A deal with a djinn cannot be unbound. If you try to renege, you will be twisted in agony for the rest of eternity."

It sucked, I admit. I had to do it. “I know.”

He put his hand back, and we shook. His smile was wide and white, and just a hint devilish.

“Now, I need to find a few shells for you,” he said. “I assume they prefer to occupy the same sex?”

“*You’re damn right,* ” Ulnyx said. I could feel his excitement at the prospect of being free.

“Yes,” Charis said for Vilya.

Josette was silent.

“*Josette?* ” I asked.

It took her a few seconds to respond.

“*I won’t take someone else’s soul* ,” she said. *“I’m sorry, Landon.* ”

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I wish I could have said I was surprised. I wish I could have said that her decision wasn't something I should have expected. It was just that I had never considered that she would be so adamant about it.

I had retired to a private room Kafrit had provided, to be alone, and yet not alone. He needed time to find some willing, or less than willing participants for Vilya and Ulnyx to overpower, and I needed time to try to convince Josette that she couldn't just let me let her die.

"Landon, I'm sorry, but I will not do it," she said to me, for the hundredth time.

I had put myself down in a bare corner of the room and pulled myself back to my Source, where we could talk face to face. Ulnyx had tried to pop in, but I had banished him with a thought. I couldn't imagine anything he had to say being helpful at the moment.

"Josette, what about Sarah? She needs you. I need you to be there for her. She's been holding up pretty well, but you can

imagine what losing the mother that she just found is going to do to her."

She glared at me, an angry look in her eyes. "Don't you think I know that, Landon? This isn't an easy decision to make, or an easy thing to do, but I don't have a choice. I have lived seven hundred years believing in the true sanctity of life. All life. I never harmed a mortal soul. I never even considered not having my brother's child. You can't take me out of your body without letting me die, or giving me someone else's form, and I am not willing to do that, under any circumstances."

"Even if it means the fate of everything?"

She nodded. "Isn't that the truest test of one's beliefs? When everything is on the line? I still believe in Him, Landon, and in you. I believe you will triumph, with or without me."

I took a deep breath and tried to stay somewhat reasonable. "What if we find someone with terminal cancer, or is brain dead, or something? Someone who is as good as dead anyway?"

"No."

"Josette, please. I understand your faith, but-"

"If you understood my faith, you wouldn't say ‘but’. I've enjoyed our friendship, and I've enjoyed the time we've had to spend together, both before and since you took my soul. The fact is, I was supposed to die five years ago. What I've had since then has been a blessing, and the work of the Lord, for me to help guide you and bring you to this place. For me to meet my little girl. I want her to survive, Landon. It's what I've always wanted. You know how to make that happen. You have to do it."

It sucked. It completely, and totally sucked. I loved Josette like the sister I never had, and a best friend at the same time. Even for all the years we couldn't communicate, she was there, and I was living her life and sharing in her joys and pains. Learning how to speak to her had been one the best things that had happened since I'd become a Divine, and now she was going to be gone. Not just out of touch, but gone, gone.

"I can't," I said, the tears rolling from my eyes.

"You have to," she replied, her own face just as moist. "It is His will."

"I don't believe that."

"I do."

That was the crux of it. She believed in the Goodness of God,

and that even the nastiest demon shared some kind of lineage with Him, and as such was one of His creations. She wouldn't destroy what He had created except when she had to. Even the first night we had met, when we had fought the vampires in the alley, she hadn't killed them. She had tried to scare them off, but she had a sword, and she didn't use it. She was pro-life, and nothing in the universe, not even it's end, would change that. I hated her choice, but I respected it.

"You know I love you, right?" I asked her.

She smiled. "I love you too."

"I'd miss the hell out of you, but I don't think you have any in you. Nothing's going to be the same once you're gone."

"You'll defeat the Beast. Everything will be better."

I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. I don't think I could have held her any tighter. "Maybe for everyone else." I held her close for a minute, and then gave her a chaste kiss on the lips. "What's going to happen to you, anyway? I mean, what happens when a Divine dies?"

"Nobody knows," she said. "I'm curious to find out."

"Well then, maybe we'll meet again."

"Perhaps we will."

"I'm not saying goodbye yet. Not until the last second."

She kissed my cheek. "You have an exceptional soul."

The words were awesome, but they didn't help at all.

"I'd like to say goodbye to Sarah," she said. "And Izak. He deserves that."

I couldn't disagree. He had saved my ass more times than I could count. “Wake me up?” I asked. I always had trouble getting myself out of these weird dream states.

She reached up, and slapped my face.

A new face had been added to the group by the time I returned to Kafrit and the others. A female vampire. A young, and pretty one, with shoulder length hair that she had dyed a dark red, and strong but delicate features. She looked confused, and uncomfortable. In fact, the big guy was holding her arms behind her back.

“*Do you not see, Landon? ”* Josette asked.

I did see, but I didn’t care. Maybe I should have thought it was wrong. Maybe I should have been at least a little bit unsure, but it didn’t change that I believed Josette was more important then one

more gutter vampire.

Izak and Sarah both looked at me, their nerves obvious.

“Can I talk to both of you, in private?” I asked.

“My friend,” Kafrit said. “It would be best to get this done soon.”

“I know,” I said. “Just a few more minutes.” I walked out of the room, with Sarah and Izak behind me.

“*Are you ready for this? ”* I asked Josette, surrendering control to her one last time. I felt her spirit flood into me, her soul rising up to take hold of my body. She walked us into the room, and closed the door behind Sarah and Izak.

“Sarah, I-“

Sarah didn’t let her speak. She wrapped her arms around us, and buried her head in our shoulder.

“Don’t do this, mom. Please don’t do this. I never got to know you, I barely got to spend any time with you.”

I could feel the tears through my shirt.

“Sarah,” Josette said. She pulled her back gently. “You know I have to do this. Everything I sacrificed was to keep you safe. How could I refuse now, when you need me the most?”

“I need you here,” Sarah said. “I need my mother. Everything has been so much better since we talked. I feel so much better. Why can’t you just take another body? Vampires are scum.”

“All life is sacred, and all life deserves respect. I had my time. It should have ended long ago, but the Lord saw fit to give me a gift in a beautiful child. I could not have asked for anything better, or a life more complete.”

Sarah bowed her head. “It isn’t fair. If I hadn’t set the Beast free, you wouldn’t have to die. It’s all my fault.”

We reached out, putting our hand to Sarah’s face and cupping it tenderly. “No, my love. This is His will. Think of all of the many things that had to happen to bring us to this day. Think of how many ways we might never have met, or you might never have been. Yet here you are, and here I am, and we have this chance to say goodbye. Only God can make such blessings so.”

Sarah was crying harder, and she took us in her arms again. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you too.”

She backed away, and Izak stepped in front of us. For as tough as the demon was, even he couldn’t keep his eyes from running. He looked miserable.

“Izak, of all of the beings I have ever had the honor of knowing, you have been the greatest.” We stepped forward, and she kissed him. Not a small peck, but a solid, loving, intimate kiss. The demon was surprised at first, but he didn’t resist. He wasn’t seeing me in that moment, he was seeing Josette, his forbidden love. This was his last chance, and he didn’t waste it.

We backed away, and smiled at him. “You have made me so proud. Thank you.”

He smiled, and put his hand to his heart. We did the same.

“*I’m ready* ,” she said to me then, letting go of her control, and allowing me to reassert myself.

“*Believe it or not* ,” Ulnyx said. “*I’m going to miss you too, princess.* ”

“*And I, you, wolf,* ” she replied.

I looked at Izak and Sarah, both red-eyed and stricken. I felt the same way they looked, and it was taking a lot of effort to keep myself together. “Come on guys,” I said, my own voice sullen. “It’s the way it has to be.”

They both looked at me, but didn’t say anything.

When I returned to Kafrit, Charis was unconscious in her chair, and the red-headed vampire was leaned over her, stroking her face.

“Vilya?” I asked.

She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were as red as her hair. “Landon,” she said. “I wish we could be meeting under different circumstances.” She held out her hand.

I took it. “Me too.”

“Well my friend,” Kafrit said. “Now you see the proof, I can do the extraction. She’ll be okay, but it is taxing on the body and soul. I expect you’ll have the same reaction, possibly worse because you have two in there.”

“What does he do?” I asked Obi.

He shrugged. “He just put his hand on her forehead, whispered some gibberish, and a black cloud came pouring out of her mouth and went to the vampire. She moaned a bit, but it didn’t sound too painful.”

“Please, have a seat,” Kafrit said, pointing at the empty chair.

I walked over to it and sat. The djinn stood over me, looking into my eyes. As he did, he brought his hand up to my forehead. I could swear I saw an eye appear on his palm, right before it touched my skin. He started mumbling under his breath, words I

didn't understand and could never repeat.

I felt Ulnyx shifting within me. I focused, and saw the threads of him that bound us together, coming unraveled, spinning apart, and gathering into a single dense ball of *him* . It was an odd feeling, and it tickled and hurt at the same time. I also felt his power leaving me, and in the first seconds after it washed away I felt weaker and more naked than I could ever remember. Ulnyx had been my personal monster, my warrior armor, my key to winning so many fights. I felt his soul separate from mine.

"*See ya on the other side,* " he said, his voice echoing in my mind. Then I felt like I was choking, and I let my head fall back. The black cloud that had shoved itself into me all of those years ago came pouring out of my mouth, pooling in front of me until it was completely external. I watched as it flowed towards the big guy, whose eyes grew wide with shock. Kafrit hadn't told him he was the host. Ulnyx poured in, and a few moments later he smiled.

"I never thought I would get the chance to do this," he said. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe we weren't on as good of terms as I had thought.

Ulnyx walked towards me, his eyes menacing. I grabbed Kafrit's hand, to pull him away, because he was still chanting and he hadn't noticed the Were. Ulnyx reached me, a long, sharp smile extending across his face.

"Boo," he said, then he started laughing.

"Shut up," I whispered, finding my voice hoarse.

I felt the process starting again, Josette's soul being unwrapped from my own once more.

"*Goodbye, Josette,* " I said. "*I love you.* "

"*Goodbye, brother. I love you too. Good luck.* "

Her spirit was torn away from me, gathering into one mass of white light that slipped more easily from my body. She floated for a second above the table and then shot towards Sarah, circling around her, enveloping her in one final hug, bringing more tears and a smile to her daughter's face. Then she spun around Izak.

In an instant of blinding white light, she was gone.

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I woke up an hour later, my head resting on the poker table, surrounded by my friends and family. Well, most of them. I had lost two today, and one that hurt more than all of the others combined. I tried not to think too much about it, because there was nothing good to come of it. She had made her choice, and we all had to live with it.

I picked up my head.

"Welcome back, meat," Ulnyx said. His voice was strange to me, outside of my body and in the form of the large Russian.

"You're still here," I said. I hadn't been sure he would stick around once he was free.

"I'm not missing this action," he said.

"Landon." Charis' voice. I looked at her, almost doing a double-take at the violet eyes that looked back at me. I wasn't expecting that.

"Your eyes," I said. "They're amazing."

She smiled. "Yours too."

I turned my head, looking for Sarah. She wasn't there.

“She’s out in the truck with Izak and Alichino,” Obi said. “She couldn’t stand being in here, once Josie was gone.”

“Why is Alichino in the truck?” I asked.

“He’s working on the Box,” Charis replied. “He’s making the modifications.”

“How long?”

“Not long.”

“So, my friend, you are awake!” Kafrit stepped into the room, a huge grin on his face. “I told you I could do it, didn’t I?”

“You did. I guess I owe you one.”

“Yes. You will do well to remember.”

“I’m sure you won’t let me forget.” I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring my body’s complaints. It felt weaker than I remembered, without the Were to help augment my strength. Other things felt more dull too; my hearing, my sense of smell. It was going to take some readjustment. I could still remember some of Josette’s fighting style at least. I had learned something by practicing it for five years.

“Ulnyx,” I said.

“What’s up, meat?”

“I’m glad you’re willing to help me out. What about the rest of your pack?”

“What about them?”

I looked at him. “Think you can get them to Mumbai?”

He scowled, and then nodded. “Better for them to die in a blaze of glory. I’ll have to go round them up myself. It’s going to take a few hours, and I need some help with the rifts.”

We had two demons who could manage them. I needed Izak. I turned to Vilya. “I don’t know you that well yet, but-“

“You know me better than most,” she said, interrupting. I had Charis’ memories, so in a way that was true. “Consider it done.We’re all on the same side, right now.”

“I’ll stay on your side,” Ulnyx said, his face a little too much of a leer.

“Watch yourself, Were,” Charis said. “You’re dealing with a daughter of Baal.”

He laughed. “Even sexier,” he said. “Just warn me if I’m going too far, and you’re tempted to hellfire my balls off.”

“This should be interesting,” Obi said.

Vilya scowled at the Were.

“Kafrit, can you spare an extra car?”

He sighed. “You take advantage of my friendship, diuscrucis. There’s a Maybach in the garage out back. Pietr will drive you.”

His remaining stooge pulled a set of keys from his pocket and started walking. Ulnyx and Vilya trailed behind.

“Sorry,” I said to Charis once Vilya was gone. “I know you’re worried about her, but she’s in good, if not overly hormone-driven hands.”

Charis nodded. “I understand the need. Besides, she can take care of herself. I forget that sometimes.”

“Now what?” Melody asked. She was sitting next to Obi, her hand on his shoulder.

“Back to the rift. As soon as Alichino finishes with the Box, we head to Mumbai.”

“So, we have the pure energy, and we’ll have the Box soon enough,” Charis said, “but the Beast is still trapped, isn’t he? Which means we need to get back to his original prison to try to catch him again.”

“The prison we don’t know how to find,” I said. “We need to talk to Dante. He got us out of there, he must know how to get back.”

“Sounds like a great plan,” Obi said. He stood and headed for the door. “Let’s do it from the truck. I’ll drive, you meditate, or whatever it is you do.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “Kafrit, do you have a cell?”

He reached into a pocket and pulled out a gold-plated smartphone. “What kind of respectable businessman would I be if I didn’t?”

I took it from him, and put in my own phone number. “I can’t guarantee how long this number will work for, but I have a feeling you’ll be able to find me, when you’re ready.”

He laughed, and wrapped me in a hug. “Good luck, my friend,” he said. “Don’t think dying will get you out of our bargain.”

Most times, I would have thought it could. With Kafrit, I wasn’t too sure. I left the room without another word.

We piled into the UPS truck. Alichino was tucked into the back corner, hunched so far over the Box I couldn’t see what he was doing to it. Sarah was sitting at the opposite corner with Izak, her head resting in his lap while she slept. The demon looked pained, and he didn’t acknowledge us when we joined him in the rear.

Obi and Melody rode up front, while Charis and I took one of the free corners. We sat down with our shoulders pressed together.

Obi started the engine, and got us on the move.

"Hang in there, Landon," Charis said, nothing but warmth in her eyes.

"You too," I replied, taking her hand in my own. "Let's go find Dante."

I closed my eyes, focusing on the trickle of power coming through from Purgatory and following it back once more. The power looked and felt strange to me, no longer hued with the energy of the Were and the angel, and I felt a pang of sadness at the thought. Time seemed to stop, and I stepped forward out of my body, into a world so much like our own, but so much different. Charis was standing next to me.

She reached out and took my hand. A thought, and we were at Dante's 'house', but I knew right away he wasn't there.

"The library," I said. We were there in a blink.

Marble columns and lots of books and scrolls. That was the only way to describe the library. It was sixty feet high from floor to roof, with a tremendous dome in the center that made it look even more massive. There were a number of souls inside, some working returning items to the shelves, others reading, and a few just standing amidst the books, as if they didn't know how they should be spending their eternity.

We found Dante amidst his own pile of tomes, having amassed enough of them that he was using a larger stack as a stool to sit on. He was already looking at us when we approached. He didn't look happy.

"Millions of books," he said. "Millions, and I have found nothing but a single scrap of paper. I did go to see an acquaintance of mine, to see if he could assist you with Avriel's Box."

"Alichino," Charis said. "He thinks we can trap the Beast. He's altering the design right now."

His mood turned on a dime. "Excellente," he shouted, drawing stares from the souls around him. "So, you will be able to stop the Beast?"

"We're going to try," I said. "There's one little problem."

"We don't know how to find him," Charis said.

Dante hopped off his book-stool and held up a finger. Then he closed his eyes. "I have a connection to his prison, because it was leaking into this realm." He was still for a minute, during which he began to shake his head. "This is very, very bad," he said.

I was used to it. “What?”

“He isn’t there.”

“What do you mean, he isn’t there?” I asked. “I thought he was trapped.”

“Much of his power is still there, signore. Power that he cannot unlock without the rest of the true diuscrucis’ blood. He has gathered the rest faster than I would have thought possible, and has taken form to walk the Earth.”

“And lure us in,” I said, the objective becoming clear. “He tried to stop us a few times, but it didn’t work out. Now he’s betting that he’ll be able to get Sarah, before we can get him. He wants us to go to Mumbai. He wants us to bring the Box. He has an army in the millions, not even counting the demons and angels on his side, and it only grows with each passing minute. We have to go to him, or he’ll destroy everything, and break the balance.”

“He can’t know we’ve altered the Box,” Charis said.

I smiled. “No, he doesn’t. He killed Avriel, believing that was enough to stop us. But he’d know we’d make a run for him anyway. We don’t have any other choice.”

Dante rubbed his chin. “So you must walk right into a trap,” he said. “How will you get through these millions to reach him? How will you even know where he is?”

I thought about it. They were tough questions, that I had to answer, but had no good answer to.

“Do not be concerned, signore. I can help you with the second part. As I’ve said, I can feel his power and use it to find him, even as I can use it to find you. I will locate the Beast, and I will make his location known to you. There will be… consequences.”

“What do you mean consequences?” I asked.

“Every time I use my power in your world. Every time you use your power, or the Beast uses his power, it changes the very fabric of the reality that God shaped within the universe. Like any fabric, it can take a certain amount of pulling and twisting and still go back into form. Pull too hard, twist too tightly, and the fabric tears, or stretches, and never goes back the way it was.”

I had always understood the principle. “But what is the consequence?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, signore. What I can tell you is that I have already stretched the fabric to deliver you from the Beast’s prison, and the Beast is stretching it even now. For me to

use the strength of Purgatory, the true strength of Purgatory, in the mortal realm might be the proverbial straw that throws reality into chaos."

Charis laughed. We both looked at her, confusion on our faces.

"There are a million plus human beings being possessed at one time by a single entity bent on destroying all of God's creation, and every other mortal he kills becoming the walking dead. Haven't we already thrown reality into chaos?"

Dante smirked. "What about getting past these millions, to reach my signal?" he asked.

"We'll get by with a little help from our friends," I replied.

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Adam was waiting for us when we returned to Ivan the Great's Bell Tower. So were Darya's promised troops, in the form of fifty vampires and fifty weres. They were an interesting assortment of male and female, though most had athletic builds and the calm toughness that came from being a trained badass. They didn't look too happy to be waiting outside anywhere near the angel, who had taken a perch above them.

He dropped down when he saw us pile out of the truck. "Fredeline sent one of the Inquisitors to Mumbai to try to get a feel for the situation. They never came back."

I wasn't surprised. I could feel the balance in my gut, and with it a coldness that I had never felt before. The demons had been winning when I had come onto the scene five years ago, but the scales were tipped even further on their side now. Except, it wasn't their side. It was that the universe didn't know it.

"We've got it as good as it's going to get," I said. Alichino had complained about the bumpy ride in the back of the truck, but he had finished his changes and hopped out of the corner beaming and

proud of himself for what he had accomplished. He had shown Charis the Box, and tried to describe the math before she diverted him to teaching Sarah how to activate it.

It would take all of our power to ensnare the Beast, and to hold him. All three of us would have to have a hand on the Box, with Charis and I focusing our energy into it, powering it up. Sarah's role was to use the gathered juice to Command the Beast into the prison. Since the energy was partly his own, according to Alichino he would be unable to resist, and would find himself trapped.

"You even scrounged up a little morsel for them," Adam said. "A distraction?"

"With any luck."

"Fredeline is waiting. Once we've gone through the rift, I'll put up a beacon for her to follow. She talked a few dozen seraph into following her, and outed a bunch more as servants. We locked them away until this is over. We can worry about their penitence if we win. Oh, I have something for you." He held out his hand, and a sword materialized in it. It was a standard issue blessed seraphim blade, which was good enough. I took it from him.

"Thanks."

I waded into the gathered demons, looking for whoever Darya had put in charge. I found an older vampire named Vincent. He had white hair and a bushy white mustache resting on top of a heavy frame, and he peered at me with cautious eyes when I approached.

"Diuscrucis," he said. "Darya Commanded me to come here with my best, to assist you with a small problem. I don't know why she agreed to help you, but here we are."

I wasn't friendly or gentle with him. He didn't seem the type to warm to that approach. "We're going to be attacked as soon as we step through the rift," I said. "Your job is to make sure we don't get killed before we can get our bearings, and then just to kill as many of them as you can, without getting killed yourself."

He smiled a fanged smile. "It's been a while since I got into a real brawl. I'm looking forward to it."

It was because he didn't understand what he was getting into. Otherwise, he wouldn't be so eager. "Get your charges to the rift. Izak over there is going to activate it for you. As soon as me and mine get into the room, start going through. Be ready to get hit immediately."

It was the worst part of our otherwise desperate plan. A single

transport rift that led to the High Court building, on the southern end of the city. It sucked because we couldn't see what we were walking into, and it was a ridiculously easy place to stage an ambush, or even to pack a million possessed or dead mortals to rip all of us except for Sarah apart. Then, there was Gervais. I hadn't forgotten he was out there, one of the Beast's dead servants, a puppet on a string who could push Sarah to a bad place without much effort. I knew Izak would do his best to neutralize him whenever he made his appearance, but down a hand, I wasn't sure the fiend could handle him.

I made my way from the demons back to my group. They were all spread out around the area, Sarah and Izak in one spot, Alichino with Charis in another. Obi, Melody, and Adam made up their own group. I didn't like the fracture.

"How about a little togetherness," I said, putting some force behind my voice. It was enough to rally the troops, and bring them all together.

"Sorry, man," Obi said. "Just trying to set up a date for after we stop the end of the world."

Melody punched him in the shoulder, and he laughed. It was nervous energy, because none of us really thought we were going to get out of this alive. I looked over at Sarah, whose slumped posture worried me.

"Talk amongst yourselves," I said to them. I took Sarah aside and tapped my head. We needed to talk in private.

I felt the pressure of her knocking, and I opened her up to me. "*Sarah. I'm worried about you.* "

"*This is it, brother,* " she said. "*I've seen this part, this gathering.* "

"*When you kill me?* " I asked.

"*Yes. We make it to the Beast. Gervais is there. He tells me things, and I believe them. He promises me gifts, and I want them. All he asks is that I clear the way for him, and everything I want will be mine. I do it for him. I kill you and Charis. Without you, nothing can stop him. I do it because he says he can bring Mother and me together again in the world that he will create. I do it because he says I can have Gervais, to do whatever I please.* "

It was a chilling sequence of events, but not a believable one. "*Sarah, the Beast can't create, only destroy. That alone means your vision isn't true.* "

Her voice was hopeful, but guarded. "*How do we know that? I*

mean, can we be sure everything Malize says is right, or true? The Beast says he is a god. Maybe's he has only destroyed because that is what war is? Maybe the creation comes after? "

I had no way to know if Malize was right or not. I had no way to know which Sarah I was even talking to. She had calmed so much after being reunited with Josette, but now she had lost her again, at the very moment she needed the most strength. Sarah was a total unknown to me, a wildcard. I loved her, but I had no idea whose side she was on right now, or whose side she'd be on ten minutes from now.

"*Bringing her back would mean killing everything else* ," I said. "*Is there any part of you that believes that your mother would have wanted that, when she wouldn't even accept the sacrifice of a single demon? "*

She was silent for only a moment. "*No. You're right. I'm being stupid. "*

"*You're not stupid, but be careful reading too much into what you see. For all we know, the Beast or Gervais are planting those visions in your head somehow. "* I didn't really believe that. Father Tom had said all true crossbreeds were destined to go insane. I had been inside Sarah's head. I understood why.

She broke the connection, and then walked over to me and put her arms around me. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," I replied. "I know you won't let anything happen to us, and I know you'll make your mother proud."

We returned to the group. There still wasn't too much communication between them, but what did I expect? For the most part, they weren't friends. They were allies, rallying around me for their own sake as much as everyone else's.

I took center stage, and coughed to get their attention. "If you've seen one of those cheesy speeches from the end of one of those movies where the fate of the world is on the line… yeah, that." I smiled and put my hand into the center of our jagged circle. Obi was next, followed by Charis, Melody, Sarah, Adam, and Izak.

"I'm not a fighter," Alichino said. "I'll stay here and wait for you to come back for me."

"You're coming," I said to him, looking at our group. We had two mortals, two Divine diuscrucis and two angels. We needed a second demon. It was a better balance. "Even if Sarah has to make you do it."

Alichino frowned, and hopped forward to put his hand in.

“One… Two… Three…”

We shouted as one, all of our different histories, different goals, different motivations, and different allegiances for a moment forgotten.

“Break!”

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It could have been Hell on Earth, but I didn't think even Hell was that bad. We came out of the other side of the rift into a war zone unlike anything that could be described, or make any kind of sense. There was no logic to it, only destruction.

The rift had once been below the High Court of Bombay, a judicial house that saw many of the legal cases in the city. The High Court had been decimated around it, the rift left intact in order to give us passage through. The hundred demons I had borrowed were nearly all gone in the four seconds it took to enter the maelstrom, ripped apart by a pair of wraiths that were circling the rift, a crowd of thousands behind them.

It was early evening. The sky was dark, with heavy clouds blocking out the sunlight, although no rain was falling. The ground held a sheen of sweat from earlier precipitation, and the heat of the fires burning throughout the city was enough to add a few degrees to the ambient temperature. There were possessed and undead as far as I could see, and plenty more people who were no longer moving under any circumstances. They hung from windows,

dangled from cars, and lay broken in the streets. There was smoke everywhere, the sound of alarms, screaming, crying, pain, and suffering.

It nearly took my breath away. It nearly broke me before I could act, ripping the bracelet from my arm and pulling in the power I needed with a ferocity I couldn't remember having felt before. I leveled the blessed sword in front of me, and rocketed towards one of the wraiths. Black tentacles reached for me, contorting and shifting to pointed edges and heavy balls that aimed to crush my body. The ground below me cracked and tore into dozens of cement shields, rising up to block the creatures efforts, and I brought the blade down with a cold satisfaction.

I turned towards the second wraith, and was blinded by the beam of light that shot up into the sky, courtesy of a small etched disc Adam had placed on the ground. Before the wraith could move in on any of us, Fredeline fell from the sky, tearing into it with the Deliverer. Fifty angels fell into the surrounds, crashing up against the evil creatures the Beast had made the mortals into.

"It's about time you arrived," they said, a hundred thousand voices all rising at once in his voice. It was a wave of sound that crashed over us, threatening our sanity and will. "You seem to be a little outnumbered." He laughed, and they laughed. "Did you bring the Box?"

I stepped right up to one of the possessed. "Why don't you tell me where you are, so we can make this quick?" I asked.

Thousands of heads shook at once. "What would be the fun in that. I told you I would win." A hand grabbed for me. I brought the sword up and around.

"Landon, where do we go?" Sarah was standing in the center of our group, and we circled up around her and began wading into the masses. They tried to push past, to grab, to strike. Izak brought up a wall of hellfire around us, incinerating the slow and knocking the rest back. As soon as the flames subsided, they charged in again.

"Dante is going to send us a signal," I said. I knew it couldn't be too far from where we came in. He would want to grab her, and take her back to his prison before we could even think about stopping him.

I heard wings then, and a mass of devils and fallen angels dropped over the throng, landing right in front of Sarah and reaching for her.

“No,” she shouted. Her Command went out like a shockwave, and the ambushers froze in their steps. “Kill them.” She pointed past us. Most of the demons complied. The ones that fought off the order fell before they could recover their momentum.

I swung the sword, focusing my strength on my body, enhancing my sword arm to make clean cuts, and my other hand to throw solid punches. I tried to ignore the faces of the people I was killing, their human eyes and heads and clothes. I tried to see them only as they were, shells for use by an angry being. I tried to keep us from being swallowed in it.

Was it even possible? With each passing second, it felt less and less so. There were almost seventy of us now, between the angels and the controlled demons and our initial group, yet it was barely enough to keep the circle intact, and to keep them from reaching Sarah. Nobody was tired yet. Nobody had fallen.

Then came the signal, Dante’s signal. I had no idea what it was going to be, but he didn’t disappoint. All I had to do was look up, and see the change in the formation of the clouds above us. With one look, it was dark and threatening. With another, I could see the reddish orange of the setting sun against much higher clouds, and all of the dark nimbuses had pulled together, creating a series of arrows that all pointed to a ring shaped formation that from my vantage looked to be a mile or so away.

I felt something else when it happened, something I couldn’t describe. As if I could sense that the universe had just been stretched beyond repair. Whether it was a minor pucker, or a complete tear, I couldn’t know.

“There,” I shouted, my sword reaching through another neck, my foot lashing out and throwing back a dozen undead from my left. I had lost Josette, but a lot of her skill had stayed, learned subconsciously through repetition.

“That’s not close,” Obi said. He had his knife in hand, and he was doing good business with it, but I could see he was getting bruised and bloodied by the sheer number of flying arms and legs.

I heard a scream, and shifted my attention backward. One of the angels had been lost beneath a sea of humanity. A second later, and another vanished.

“This thing has no power against them,” Fredeline shouted, the Deliverer nothing more than a sharp piece of metal when demons weren’t involved. She was a good fighter, but she didn’t have the

power to overcome them. She could Calm them, but they would be replaced faster than she could talk.

"Dante?" the Beast asked. "You sent Dante? You thought he could stop me?"

They started laughing again. All of them. An insane thunderclap of mirth that would have drove the courage from anyone. We were losing. We were going to lose.

A great howl pierced the din, rising above the laughter of thousands. It was followed by a dozen more, then even more. The laughter stopped. I looked back, and I could see the bodies flying away from a dark mass, thrown aside like matchsticks. A gout of flame rose up in front of us, searing the bodies in our path before subsiding. It was hellfire, but it was nearly blue from the intensity.

"Cavalry's here," Alichino said. He was hunched behind Charis, doing his best to stay alive, bringing his claws down on the foot of an enemy when he could so it safely.

The Great Were's massive shape landed next to me, a single slash sending a dozen bodies away from us. Ulnyx turned his sharp maw towards me and grinned. "I thought I was going to miss the good part," he said.

"How many did you bring?" I asked.

"All of them that were fit to die. Three hundred."

Another blast of hellfire removed another ten feet of flesh from our path. We moved forward to fill it as fast as we could. Another angel died, and two of Sarah's controlled demons. The reinforcements had helped us double our distance in a matter of seconds, but I still wasn't sure it was enough.

"Great Were," the Beast said through his multitude of mouthpieces. "I can offer you anything. Don't waste your time on the wrong side of this fight. Grab the girl and bring her to me."

Ulnyx looked at me, and then back at Sarah.

"Can you bring back the dead when their bodies and souls are lost?" he asked.

"I can," he replied. A lie.

The Were was unimpressed. "I'll think about it. Killing you is too much fun right now." He smashed another pile aside.

We moved forward another two blocks before the Beast upped the ante. Sitting in the road in front of us was a huge stack of crushed cars, melted together with a blast of hellfire. The wall ran across from one building to the next, completely choking our

ingress. We cut a channel through the undead and possessed, and then came face to face with the barrier.

“Now what?” Obi asked. He was out of breath, and his arms and hands were covered in bleeding cuts. Pieces of flesh were torn from him, and his clothes were tattered. Melody didn’t look much better standing next to him, covered in blood, though her body was healing underneath.

I focused, reaching out to the metal, forcing it to corrode. It started to happen, but there was just so much, and a new distraction made itself known.

“Sarah.” The voice echoed through the streets. A familiar voice. I looked up to the top of the wall, where Gervais was standing, staring directly at his offspring.

It was as if everything else paused while the parent and child had their moment. They locked eyes, and I stared at Sarah, waiting to see how she would react to him once more.

“Kill him,” she Commanded the two fallen angels that remained of those she had taken. They flew up at the demon, but all it took was a touch from him to make them fall to ash and ruin.

“Now that is no way to treat your father,” he said. He gathered himself and jumped, falling towards us. He never made it.

Izak’s own leap brought him slamming into Gervais, and the two of them knocked back against the wall of cars. Gervais tried to put his hand to the demon’s head, but he held it off with his good hand, while the broken remains of the other lit up with hellfire, pressed against the archfiend’s chest. He might not bleed, but fire could still incinerate him. He shoved Izak away, and jumped back up the wall.

“We need to go around,” I said, finding the door to the building on the right. It was a hotel or something, with a revolving glass door that had been shattered to pieces, and a formerly glitzy inner that was shredded and mangled. We changed direction, still moving the mass of humans aside.

“Don’t you think I wanted you to go in the building, kid?” the Beast taunted. “Why don’t you just give her over now, and save us all the trouble. It will hurt less for you.”

I didn’t answer. I used my fists, feet, and sword to punch through the mob.

“Melody!” Obi’s shout broke that focus, and I glanced over to see the angel on the ground, a vampire hunched over her, a cursed blade in her gut. He kicked the vampire off. “Holy water!”

“There isn’t any,” Adam said. “We used it all.”

He broke free of the fight and knelt next to her. More demons began appearing amidst the mortals, sneaking along with them and launching themselves at us. Obi had a pair of fangs in his neck before he brought the knife up and into his assailant, and he cursed and yelled. Melody lay at his feet.

“Damn you all,” he roared. He threw the corpse of the vampire into the crowd, knocking a few more back. I smelled a sour odor, like bad citrus, and then the vampire was up at and him again. When Obi stabbed him, there was no blood.

“Ulnyx, help him,” I said. The Were broke from my side and hopped over, grabbing the vampire and ripping him in half, throwing the pieces away. I covered his spot, focusing harder to keep them at bay.

“Melody,” Obi said. He joined Adam kneeling with her.

“We have to move,” I told them.

“Landon, she’s dying,” he said.

“We have to move, or we’re all going to die.”

He knelt and lifted her, throwing her over his shoulder. As he did, Izak crashed into the ground in front of Sarah, his back breaking under the force. Gervais landed on top of him.

“Hello, my love,” he said to her. She punched him in the face.

It didn’t do any damage. He started to laugh, but then a streak of heat blasted into his side and threw him away. Vilya.

“Get inside,” I shouted. “Get inside.”

Izak healed, and regained his feet. We started moving again. Two more angels fell, and then a few of the weres. From what I could see, the nearly four hundred plus we had started with had been reduced to less than fifty. We were only a quarter of the way there.

“It still isn’t enough,” I said to nobody.

“No, it isn’t,” the Beast replied in a thousand voices. “It never was. Just give it up, and let me take her. I’ll tell you what. You hand her over now, and I’ll kill you quickly. Maybe.”

I saw Gervais just in time.

He was headed for Sarah again, at a full run, trying to grab her and get away like a thief. I was out of physical range, but there was more than enough detritus lying around. I focused, pulling up a heavy block of concrete and smashing it into his head. He tumbled away, his head partially caved in, but he didn’t stay down. He

grabbed Fredeline, and destroyed her., turning her to ash with a touch.

"No," Adam shouted. He threw himself at the archfiend, almost getting his sword down before Gervais knocked him to the ground. He would have killed him too, but Izak got back into the fight, scalding him with a well-placed ball of hellfire. The angel picked up the fallen Deliverer, taking up her place in the circle.

I smelled the bad citrus again, and looked to where Fredeline's outline of ash lay on the street. A moment later, Obi screamed.

It was Melody. She had died while he carried her, and the Beast had taken her body. She had planted her sword into his back, and it stuck out the front of him. He hefted her up in his strong arms and threw her away, then dropped to his knees.

"Get it out," he shouted. Sarah came up behind him and took the sword, pulling it from his body while he cried out in pain. Blood poured from the wound, but he got back to his feet, fueled by his anger.

We reached the doorway, and stumbled inside. Izak had vanished, lost in the scrum with Gervais, and we had only a small collection of weres and seraph remaining. The hotel had already been used up, and so it stood empty. As soon as we were all inside, I focused, bringing up every bit of junk that I could find to seal the windows and the doors, to keep the crowd outside from getting in.

"Ulnyx, Adam, make sure the entrances are covered. We need to regroup."

The Great Were growled orders to his pack, and Adam directed the remaining angels. I rushed over to Obi, who fell to the ground on his side, gasping for air.

"I'm sorry, man," he said to me. "I wanted to do this."

"Shut up," I said. "You aren't dead yet." I put my hand on his wound. He pushed it away.

"No way. You're too weak."

"I'm not going to let you die," I said.

"I'm not going to let you save me," he replied.

I could feel the tears rising to my eyes.

"Don't cry for me, man. I'm going to be in Purgatory, waiting for your sorry ass."

No. He was going to be taken by the Beast. Unless we burned him. I looked for Vilya, who was sitting on the ground, exhausted. Where was Charis?

“You aren’t dying yet, Obi,” she said, coming up to us from the other side. She looked like crap, but she was still alive. She knelt down, and took my hand, putting it back on his wound with hers. “It will be easier if we both do it.”

I smiled at her, and then focused. I felt her energy joining mine, and our hands grew warm together. Obi coughed, but the color started returning to his face.

“I lost Mel,” he said, once he had healed. There were tears in his eyes.

I didn’t know what to say. I just nodded.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are.” An avalanche of sound blasted the hotel, shaking its foundation. My barrier vibrated from the pounding of thousands of fists.

I looked around the room. Adam, Ulnyx, Vilya, Charis, Alichino, Sarah, and I; plus a few dozen other weres and seraph, against one million or more.

We had lost.

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I closed my eyes, and tried to figure out how we had gotten to this place, this moment. I had only been dead for five years. I had been a champion for man for a blip in time, such a tiny fraction compared to Josette, or Charis. I had failed, and miserably. It sucked.

I kept my hold on Charis' hand, leading her to where the others sat, trying to regain some strength. I could hear fighting in the background, the back door, the loading dock, wherever there was another way in. It was a tight fit though, and the bodies would pile up and make it harder for more than one or two at a time to get through. A Divine could handle two at a time with ease.

There was no way out. No way to win. We had the Box, but we wouldn't be able to get it to the Beast before one of us died, or Sarah was taken. There was only one reasonable thing to do, that would save some of what remained.

I had to kill Sarah.

If she were gone, the Beast would take this world, but he wouldn't be able to gain a foothold on the others. He wouldn't be

able to rise to the power that had allowed him to fight such a pitched battle against God. He would be trapped here, forever, or forced to find greener pastures somewhere else. I didn't know enough about how it worked to know for sure. All I knew was that it would be enough to keep him from being as strong as he once was.

"Sarah," I said, letting go of Charis' hand and approaching her. I think she knew what I was thinking, because she nodded.

"It's okay, brother," she said. "I know what you have to do. I forgive you." She even tilted her neck, to make the killing stroke easier.

"What is she talking about?" Adam asked. Then he realized. "Landon, you can't."

"I have to," I said. "We lost."

"We haven't lost yet."

I turned to him. "No? How do you suppose we get through a million enemies with forty of us?"

"I can do it," Ulnyx said. It was a macho lie, and we both knew it.

"We don't need to get through them. Only the three of you do," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Charis asked.

"We need to find a way to get the three of you to the Beast. The seraph can fly you there."

Vilya laughed. "You don't think he has demons waiting for you to try?"

"Do you have a better suggestion, demon?" Adam asked.

She stayed quiet.

I closed my eyes and focused, reaching upwards as far as I could. The demons were there. A lot of them. "She's right," I said. "It won't work."

There was silence for a moment.

"Landon, kill me," Sarah said. "Keep the Beast from taking everything. One world is better than all of creation."

I looked into her eyes. I saw the fear, and the sadness, and the strength. She had stood up to Gervais, and had triumphed, overthrowing his power over her. For what? At least she hadn't been forced to kill me.

I felt my heart begin to race, and my breath caught in my throat. The realization hit me in the gut, and knocked the breath out of me.

I turned and looked at Ulnyx, then Charis, then Sarah. There was one way to get the three of us there. It was scarier than anything I had ever imagined, but maybe it was just stupid enough to work. I took the sword and turned it, holding it out to Sarah.

"Sarah," I said. "You have to kill Charis and me."

"What?"

It was the same word, echoed by everyone there, except for Alichino.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. That's brilliant. Better than Averbakh-Spassky in '56."

"Landon, no," she said, her voice little more than a whisper. "I can't. You said I wouldn't have to. You said it wouldn't happen like that."

"You have to," I said. It was the only way.

"No no no no no no no," she cried, backing away. "I can't. Please, don't ask me to. I won't. I saw it, Landon. I saw it. I told you. You promised."

"Knock, knock," the voices said from outside. Something slammed into my wall, and the whole building shook.

"Sarah, we don't have time. Take the sword, and cut off my head." I couldn't believe I had said it, and meant it.

"Sarah, please," Charis said. "You have to."

"No," she screamed. She turned to run, but Vilya grabbed her.

"Let her go," Charis said. The demon complied.

"Sarah," I moved around in front of her. The wall got slammed again, and the building shook. "Your mother gave her life for me once, so that I could survive, and protect you. I'm giving my life to you, now, so that you can save everything else. All of those people out there, they don't belong to the Beast. They don't deserve to be prevented from going to the next life, with God's grace in Heaven if that is their destiny."

She put her head down. "I'm sorry, I can't."

I looked back at Charis, and took a deep breath. I knew what I had to do, but it killed me to have to do it.

"Sarah. This is your fault. You caused this. Your selfishness, your desire. Melody is dead because of you. Thomas is dead because of you. Your mother is dead because of you. Izak is probably dead too."

Her head snapped up, her pain and agony obvious.

"You have a chance to redeem yourself, but you're still too

selfish. You're still too concerned with what you want, instead of what will help everyone else. This whole time, you've been more worried about what you saw, the future you didn't want, then what might really happen, and what you might need to do."

I jabbed the sword at her feet, focusing to make sure it planted upright in the tile and cement floor. The walls shook again, and I could see them beginning to crumble.

Sarah was shaking, trying to contain all of the conflicting emotions that I knew would be racing through her. I had one more card to play. It was the last one in my hand.

"You're just like your father."

The growl that came from her was guttural and inhuman. I locked eyes with Charis, watching Sarah's reflection in them. I knew when she grabbed the sword and pulled it from the floor. I knew when she raised it up. I knew when she swung it at my head. It took a lot of effort to let her do it.

I died for a second time.

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Everything slowed. I felt my body, and the pain for only an instant, and then I felt nothing. I was floating weightless in the space I had just occupied, as though the air were water, and I could swim in it. There was a roar, like an ocean, or thunder, and in the distance I saw a small, round, black pinprick of emptiness that called out to me, ordering me to it.

I saw Sarah, standing there, her chest heaving, looking down on my body, on my head that had rolled a few feet away, and the volumes of blood pooling on the floor, so much that she had to step back to keep her freet out of it. I had no muscles to move, no brain to think. I was a soul, a form of light or darkness or maybe just plain gray. I had only the most primitive thought, and a single goal. Join with her. It was the thought I had died with, and it stayed with me.

I felt myself floating towards her, my momentum gathering but unable to be slowed, like a rocket in space. Her face grew in front of me, looming up, a massive visage of horror, pain, guilt, anger, sadness, and love. Her mouth was a black cave, and I flowed

towards it, and then into it.

There was no sound, only feeling. First, it was empty, and then, it wasn't. I could feel her soul. I could hear her heart. I could sense every hormone, blood vessel, and muscle. There was a small white light, and I followed it. I fell on top of it. I took hold of it, and wrapped myself into it. My own senses came alive. The feel of air, the sound of the banging outside, the understanding of what Sarah was feeling, of the damage I had intentionally done. I took it all in, and I held onto it, and I forced it to be part of me. Sarah had no eyes to see with, but the world lit up in shades and shapes and colors, senses that I didn't understand, and yet suddenly found familiar. I was there, in Sarah's soul. I had access to her mind, and her body. I could have wrested control, but I didn't. She needed to finish this.

I felt her moving towards Charis. She didn't defend herself, and nobody tried to stop it. Sarah brought the sword up again, still growling and whimpering, and swung it hard. I pushed, just a little, guiding the blade to a cleaner cut. I sensed her body fall, and I sensed the light of her soul. Sarah stood there, panting, while she joined me.

"*Landon?* " Her voice was ethereal, echoing, afraid.

"*I'm here,* " I replied. My confidence brought her comfort.

"*Brother* ," Sarah whispered in her head. "*Why did you make me do this?* " I could feel her pain, I knew how much it hurt.

"*Your mother believed in sacrifice. You've done her the greatest honor you could imagine* ," I replied.

"*I'm a murderer. An evil killer.* "

"*You're a hero. A savior. Tell Ulnyx he needs to take you to the Beast.* "

I didn't dwell too much on the fact that I was dead. I had already technically been dead after all. The only thing I had lost was the freedom to move about in a shell of my own. Now I was tied to Sarah's mortal body. Would I die for real if she died? I didn't want to find out.

"*I never knew what to expect,* " Charis said. I couldn't see her, but I could feel her. I knew she was there with me.

"*I'm sorry this had to happen* ," I replied.

"*Don't be. If this is what it takes, so be it. I didn't spend all of these years preparing in order to lose.* "

"Ulnyx," Sarah said. The Great Were lifted his head and peered

at her. “Landon wants you to bring me to the Beast.”

The monster laughed. “Still alive in there, after all? You’ll get used to it, meat.”

“*Sarah, the Box is in my pants pocket* ,” Charis said.

She stepped around the blood, leaned down and reached into the pocket, taking it out. She handed it to Ulnyx. “Do you know what to do?” she asked.

“Of course,” he replied.

“Charis,” Vilya said, stepping between the Were and Sarah. “Be careful.”

The wall shook again, and the barrier began to crumble. The front line began crawling through the spaces, ignoring the deep cuts the jagged rock was making in their skin. Ulnyx reached out and took Sarah in a massive claw, tucking her under his arm, and backhanded Vilya. She flew away and rolled along the floor. With a grunt, the Were took off towards the rear of the building.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked.

“It needs to look convincing,” he said. “I didn’t break the skin, she’ll get over it.”

We charged to the rear, where an angel was defending against the onslaught. Ulnyx ran him through on his claws and tossed him aside, then shoved through the undead.

“Change your mind?” the Beast asked through bodies the Were was mauling on his way by. He was clearly amused at the turn of events.

“I know a loss when I see one.”

“I’ll open a path for you. What are you terms?”

“Lylyx. That’s all I want.”

If he hadn’t been helping us, I would have believed he wasn’t helping us. It occurred to me that it could still be the case, but I was hoping our outing in Italy had been enough to convince him. It seemed oddly amusing that the fate of the universe had just fallen to the paws of a giant dog.

“Done,” the Beast said. The mob spread apart around him, allowing him access straight to the building Dante had pointed out. The clouds were still there, but they had fallen into ruin. I could only imagine what he had done to the poet.

We reached him within two minutes, riding under the arms of the Were while he loped along. He didn’t speak, and we didn’t speak, all of us just waiting for the game to play out to its final

move. We were down to the Hail Mary, but at least we had a killer quarterback.

The building the Beast had holed up in was a six-story office that had earlier that day housed some kind of outsourcing firm. He had taken the liberty of hollowing it out, throwing the computers, desks, chairs, and other equipment out of the windows, and demolishing huge portions of the floors so that he had a tall ceiling above him. We entered at a slow walk, Ulnyx keeping his senses sharp for any kind of trick or trap. I had no doubt the Beast would betray him, and he probably knew as much too. The only question would be how and when.

We found him sitting on a throne of mortals, still alive but twisted by his will into a contorted mess of poses that gave him purchase to rest on their limbs. On his knees next to him on one side was Dante, his head bloody, his face more haggard then usual. On the other side was Izak. He was still alive, but he had a mark carved into his chest. Gervais' brand. The archfiend stood behind the demon, wearing a smug expression.

"No," Sarah said, seeing him there.

Ulnyx squeezed her tight, pushing the air from her. "Be quiet," he snarled.

"Now, now, Ulnyx," the Beast said. That sick smile spread across his face. "I need her alive."

Ulnyx put Sarah down and shifted, taking on the form of the big Russian. "Here she is," he said, giving her a little push forward. "Go kill whatever, or whatever it is you do. Just get me Lylyx back."

He still held Avriel's Box in his hand, which was so large it concealed it completely.

"It's a wonder to me," the Beast said, rising to his feet and walking towards us. "I've never seen a Great Were who cared at all for anyone. Yet your heart's desire is to have a single bitch in return?"

"You have me," Sarah said. "Why don't you just do what you're going to do and shut up."

The Beast laughed. "Give me a few moments to enjoy this, won't you. Everything else is going to be a cake-walk compared to the crap that Landon put me through. Do you know, there was a minute there where I actually had the thought that I could potentially lose? It was only for a second, but it was there. That's more than I can say for anyone else." He walked past Sarah, getting right in the

Were's face. "Well, Ulnyx? Is that really what you want?"

I could hear him breathing. I could feel his anger rising. He knew the Beast couldn't bring her back. If he hadn't, he'd realized it now.

"Yes," he said, holding his temper.

"Okay," the Beast said. "I can do that. There's just one thing." He leaned in close, his mouth only coming up to Ulnyx's bicep. "I know this is a trick," he whispered.

He held out his palm, and a flash of blackness hit Ulnyx right in the chest. He fell to the ground in a heap.

"No!" All three of us said it at once. The Box fell from the Were's hand, coming to rest at our feet. Sarah bent down to grab it, but the Beast took her by the wrist.

"You think I'm stupid, don't you, kid," he said. "You think I wouldn't catch on to this? It was a ballsy move, and smart, I'll give you that. I haven't lived for eons just to be fooled by something so mundane."

He started tugging, the force pulling us away from the Box.

"You don't need that thing anymore," he said, "but I appreciate how much work you put into preparing it for me. It will make it much easier for me to reel in the Big Fish. I have to say, it was also pretty damn helpful how you wrapped up all of the power I need up into one big package. I mean, I was ready to let go of what you took from me, for the sake of the bigger picture, but this is going to work out better than I could have hoped. Gervais, the rift."

The archfiend and Izak both rose and walked to the rear of the human throne. There had to be a rift back there.

I found Sarah's consciousness. I pushed myself into it, aiming to take control. We had to break his grip, and get away from him. I found myself with muscle, bone, touch, and taste once again. I saw the way she saw, and I felt the pain of the Beast's grip. I planted my feet and pulled back, hard, focusing, finding my own power, finding Charis', finding Sarah's. I joined them all into the strength of her mortal arm, wrenching the Beast backward, throwing him to the far wall.

I turned and saw the Box, ten feet away. I made a run for it.

Izak tackled us, knocking us to the ground and stealing the wind from our lungs. Even with my power, Sarah was still mortal. There was nothing I could do to make her body hold up as well as my Divine form could. I could make the muscles stronger, but I couldn't

make everything more resilient. Izak twisted our arm behind us, threatening to break it. I kept us struggling and fighting, but even one-handed he could hold her without much trouble. The Beast stood and dusted off his pinstriped suit.

"Full of surprises," he said. "I'm actually starting to think I'm going to miss you, kid. I don't even think God will be as much fun to play against as you've been."

"I'm not done yet," I said in Sarah's voice. I focused, taking all of the power again and willing the ground beneath him to open up. He stayed in position, floating over the gaping hole.

"No, not anywhere near good enough," he laughed.

I focused again, pulling the walls in on him, to crush him beneath the stone. He held out his hands, and it all crumbled to dust around him.

"Your power is my power, moron," he shouted. "Except, I have a lot more of it, if you haven't figured that out by now. There is nothing you can do to stop me. What?"

I didn't know what was happening behind us. What I did know was that Izak's hands were pulled from Sarah's body, and I heard a thump nearby. I would have loved to know what was going on, but there was no time. I focused, pulling the Box to our hand and then abandoning control, leaving Sarah standing there, holding it.

"No," the Beast said. "You're mine. You can't do this." He came running towards us, a sudden panic in his voice.

"*Sarah, do it* ," I said.

I felt her focusing, pulling at our souls. I felt the stream of energy pouring through me, from my Source to her. I felt Charis with me, within me, her being as raw and naked as my own. The Box began to glow in our senses, a red-gold hue that matched the color of Sarah's lost eyes.

"You can't do it," the Beast said. "His Box can't hold me."

"It can," Sarah said. She kept taking, and I started to feel dizzy and dry. It took her only seconds to suck every last bit of the Beast's power through our conduits to Purgatory, to steal it from our souls, and to mix it with her own, creating a perfect balance of strength.

The Beast reached us, and his hand grabbed for the Box. "I won't let it," he said.

The hand moved like it was in slow motion.

"You have no choice. Stop," she Commanded.

The power of it created a shockwave that shook the floor below

us, and threatened to finish the collapse I had started. Outside, I heard a million cries of agony.

Inside, the Beast stopped.

The power kept growing, beginning to arc from the Box and swirl around us, catching us all in a maelstrom of energy.

“Get in the Box,” she ordered.

The Beast reached forward and put his hand on the Box, and vanished.

He was in there. I knew it, because I could feel the change around us immediately. I heard shouting and confusion from the people outside. I felt the flames of the rift burst into existence behind us. Sarah held the Box, the power condensing on it, the Templar script glowing and flowing like the river of power that had contained the Beast once before.

Still she poured more into it.

“*It isn’t enough* ,” she said. “*Landon, it isn’t enough.* ”

I could feel it through her. Our power was almost used up. Hers was nearly gone. The Box was beginning to heat up and crack.

“You know what you have to do,” Dante said, coming up next to us. He had been released when the Beast had gone in.

I did know, but I didn’t want to just accept it. I had heard firsthand what had happened before. I knew that it would be forever. How could I do that? How could I just give everything for everyone else, and leave nothing for me? I was a nice guy, but I wasn’t *that* nice.

“*You won’t be alone* ,” Charis said. “*Landon, we have to.* ”

The Box continued to get warmer, the cracks spreading.

“*Landon!* ” Sarah cried.

Why couldn’t I have just died, that day in the museum? Nothing that had happened since was worth this moment, and what I knew would come. Having Charis didn’t make it better, it made it worse. She would be subjected to the same fate.

“Find a way,” I said to Dante, taking hold of Sarah just long enough to speak to him. “Find a way to end this, forever. Just hiding the Box is too big of a risk. One day it will be found. It has to be over.”

“I will, signore.”

“*Sarah, stay strong. Your fate is your own, no matter what anyone says.* ”

“*I will, brother.* ”

I found Charis then, in Sarah's soul. She materialized in front of me, her nude form perfect in its radiance. She had tears in her eyes, and I'm sure I did too.

"I love you," I said. I didn't think I needed to say it, but I did anyway.

"I know," she replied. She didn't need to say it either.

I took her hand, and we stepped into the flood.

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I saw it all, in a fog of emotions that made it hard to find the truth behind them. I watched him touch the box and disappear, after I took the weak, mortal form and used it to defy him. After I surprised the demon and pulled him away, giving them the precious seconds they needed. The other one had fled when he went in, his own power diminished by losing his master. He had taken his toy with him.

I saw it all. The Outcast approaching the girl, Sarah. Her words to him, not the girl's words but his. I knew what he was going to do. I knew what he had to do, for another had done it before. The Box had flashed in a vaporous blue light, the cracks had sealed, and she had been stricken with such grief, she had let it fall to the floor. It landed, bounced a few times, and sat alone in the darkness.

She had looked around then, confused, lost, and scared. The Outcast tried to speak to her, but she screeched at him and clawed at his face until he backed away, and vanished. She thought she was alone, but then other mortals started entering the building, confused, looking for answers. She had snatched up the Box and

ran, pushing through them. Where was she headed?

The Were had fallen to the Beast's power, but the Beast was gone, and now he woke. The mortals wouldn't remember him. He put his nose to the air, found the scent, and gave chase.

I don't know how it had come to this. I don't know where most of these emotions had been born. I could remember pain, and sadness, and anger, and desperation. I could remember bright, white light, and finding myself outside of my body, floating in the ether, a consciousness without form. I could recall the change, the shift, the lust turning to love, the anger turning to compassion. I didn't understand it, and I still couldn't, yet I felt its compulsion all the same.

Landon had been there, crouched over the Outcast, along with another like him, and Sarah. He had looked towards me, with pain in his eyes. I had tried to go to him, but I felt like I was floating, not running. I had flowed in his direction, but there was no recognition in his eyes. They looked right through me. He couldn't see.

I was caught in the energy. I could feel it running through me. I could see the colors of it, the power of Purgatory, power that knew only one owner, that could only have ever responded to one. It was a power I hadn't understood, but it moved through me as though I were no more than energy myself. It swirled around me, and then I was somewhere else. A field. They were still there.

Every part of me wanted to cry out, to tell him I was there, and that I loved him. I knew I couldn't. I also knew my love had been no love at all. Lust, desire, and hunger, but not love. Before, there had been no other meaning to the word. Now, it was all clear. I could feel His touch, somehow. I could feel His warmth. How could that be?

I watched him go, into the house with Sarah and the one I had known as the Demon Queen. I didn't follow. There was so much between us. So much I had done that couldn't be undone. If He willed it, one day I would have the chance to apologize. For now, if I were to care for him, I could protect him. But how?

I stayed the night, right outside the house. I was there when the Beast arrived. I tried to stop him, but I had nothing in this form. Nothing but thought, emotion, and vision. I couldn't touch him, or hurt him. He didn't even know I was there. None of them did.

It wasn't until we reached Florence that I discovered I could gain physical form only through a mortal shell. Landon was being

attacked, and I was desperate to help him. It was that emotion that drove me to a man sitting at a restaurant table. I felt my energy passing through him, and then I saw the light of his soul. I took hold of it, wrapped that desperation around it, and then I was looking through his eyes.

Mortals are weak, and they are slow. They are easily tired, easily destroyed. Their muscles are limited, a large majority of their bodies out of shape. In the past, I had held disdain for them. They were good only as a food source for the superior race. Now, even with those limitations, I found myself intrigued. I could see the man's memories. I could feel his emotions. I found respect for their complexity, and understanding for their plight. Maybe I knew Landon in a new way, then. Maybe I cared for him more. Either way, I had used the form to tackle one of the weres that chased him. It wasn't much, and the demon had killed my host with little effort, but it had slowed him down.

From there on, I had followed, always with him, or a step behind. I had seen the Beast's ambush on the train. I had pulled the brakes and stopped them short, giving him as much warning as I could. Being limited to controlling of mortals was difficult, for they rightly ran away from the Divine.

Then, in the depths of a warehouse in Japan, I had found my chance, my own true opportunity to try to reveal myself to him. To show him I was there where he couldn't reject me. I had taken the body of the girl, Elyse. I had fought him, with all the strength and fervor the mortal flesh would allow. I had played the role of the daughter well, and as he left I kissed him, hoping it would stir his memories, and open his eyes to my true form.

He barely noticed.

It was the way he looked at her. He had never looked at me that way. There had been lust, his as much as mine, but that was all. It was that lust that I had believed was love, but he never knew me well enough to love me. Just as I didn't know him well enough to truly love him. Yet, I cared. I cared that I had betrayed him, that I had helped the Beast to escape, that I had caused him pain. I could see in his eyes that he loved her. I could see when they looked at one another that they *knew* . Even though they never directly showed it or said it. I couldn't compete with that, and realized I didn't want to.

To truly cherish something is to do everything in your power to

see it reach its greatest potential.

Such thoughts had never been mine before. They'd been lost in a hunger for control, a thirst for power, a desire of flesh and blood. They'd been buried beneath the promises the Beast had made to me, promises that I had fooled myself into believing would come to pass, right up until he plunged the sword into my heart.

That was it, I knew. The sword. It had glowed with white heat, searing my heart. Uncovering the layers of darkness and deceit, pulling them apart like petals on a black rose. Beneath was a heart that could feel, all of the emotions He had given His creations, though they had been twisted by his son's misunderstanding.

I followed, and I waited. I knew my time would come, my chance would come to make good on my new heart's desire to atone for my sins, and to save the man who had ignited the first spark of emotion within me.

It was that look. That final look he had given me before we left the prison. Despite what I had done, he still cared. Forgiveness existed, if only I had the strength and will to look for it, and ask for it.

He had given me hope and catalyzed my redemption.

I would be his salvation.

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Book Four: Bound

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1

It started in a way I could never have expected it to. It started with, of all things, an alarm clock.

To be more specific, it was a clock radio; one of those kinds with the big blue LEDs that plugged into the wall. What year was this anyway? The song was ‘Man in the Box’ by Alice in Chains. I felt like that should have meant something to me, but it didn’t.

I kept my eyes closed. Something told me I shouldn’t open them. Something in me made me afraid. Of what? The truth? That couldn’t be right. It fled as soon as I heard the soft groan of contentment on my left.

“Landon, are you going to shut that thing up?”

I twisted my head in the direction of the voice and willed my eyelids to lift. I was greeted with a vision of beauty; long, silken black hair framing a heart-shaped face. Violet eyes still half-closed, looking at me, filled with a gentle mirth. A perfect, white smile behind soft, full lips.

“Yeah,” I said, returning her smile. I bent back the other way and hunted for the snooze button with my hand, smacking it down

at random in the general vicinity of the sound. It took me a few tries, but I turned it off.

I blinked a few times, and tried to remember whatever it was that I had been feeling only a few moments before. It was like that was real and this was the dream, but I knew that couldn't be true.

"Are you okay?" she asked me. She sat up, holding the sheets to her chest more out of habit than modesty, and ran her fingers through my hair.

"You don't feel… I don't know… strange?" I asked her. "Like you're dreaming?"

"I always feel like I'm dreaming lately." She leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Snap out of it, love. We have a plane to catch."

She threw the covers off of her and onto me, hiding my view of her perfection beneath the down. Normally, I would have rushed to get the blankets off so I could catch one last glimpse before she vanished into the bathroom. Today, I hesitated. Why did everything feel so wrong?

I heard the usual morning sounds; using the bathroom, brushing the teeth. Then the tinkle of the shower. It was the sound of the falling water that broke me from the trance. I threw the covers aside and slipped out of bed, taking only a few seconds to stare out the window at the crystal blue ocean outside. A white sand beach preceded it, empty but for a few gulls standing lookout.

Tahiti, I remembered. We were in Tahiti. We had come for vacation, two weeks of bliss away from the day-to-day. Some time to be alone, to reconnect and recharge. Time for just the two of us.

"Landon, are you coming?" she asked.

I stopped looking at the beach and at the blue ocean beyond. As I turned to head towards the bathroom, I could swear one of the gulls was looking at me.

It was a stupid thought. I laughed at myself and entered the bathroom, emptying my bladder before joining my wife in the double-stalled shower. Not that we used half of it anyway, but it had come with the hut. As usual, I caught my breath on the sight of her.

"Anxious to go home?" she asked, leaning in and kissing me. "Good morning."

I didn't know. For an instant, I forgot where home was and that there was anything waiting for me there that would have made it worth going back to. My hesitation drew attention.

“You aren’t okay, are you? What’s up?”

I tried to sputter out something, anything. I shook my head and shrugged. “Just a dream,” I said. “The strangest dream. I guess I’m not awake yet.”

She took my shower puff, squeezed some soap out onto it, lathered it up, and threw a perfect beanball. It made a solid squishing noise when it smacked into my forehead. Eyes closed in defense, I caught the puff on the way down.

“Wake up,” she said, laughing.

I laughed with her and tried to get myself together.

Excited. I should be excited. We’d spent the last two weeks alone, which meant two weeks without Clara. She could be a handful sometimes, but what would anyone expect from a six year-old? She was also a ball of loving energy, and the second most important woman in my life. Two weeks without her had been relaxing, but Charis was right. I was anxious to go home.

“Yeah,” I said. “Not as anxious as you are, I bet.”

“You know I love you, but part of me has missed her since we got here.”

I couldn’t, and didn’t blame her. “It’s been a lot of fun though,” I said.

She looked me in the eyes, a sly smile on her face. “It’s been ten years since our honeymoon. I think we earned it. Now hurry up.”

Ten years, and yet she didn’t look a day older to me. We finished the shower and I stepped out onto the marble floor and caught a peep of myself in the mirror. I looked pretty good, too.

“What time is the flight?” I asked, heading into the bedroom to grab my clothes.

“Twelve-thirty. We have half an hour to get dressed and check out. The cab should be on its way.”

I nodded even though she couldn’t see it, and pulled open the top drawer to the dresser. One outfit for each of us rested there. A pair of underwear, socks, designer jeans and a dark blue polo shirt for me. A white sun-dress for her.

“You’re going to freeze when we get back to New York,” I said. I had already questioned her choice of return dress a few times, so I was sure I was going to hear it.

“Shut up,” she replied. “I’m a big girl. Between the airport, the car, and the apartment, we’re only going to be outside for a few minutes anyway. Besides, it isn’t that cold in October.”

I smiled and slipped on my clothes, and then went back to the window to get one more good look at the ocean before Charis finished drying her hair and dressing. The gulls were still standing along the sand, though a pair had found something to fight over. They squawked and chased one another, leaving an empty gap for a third bird to swoop in and steal the prize. I couldn't see what it was, but did it matter anyway?

"Do you think Clara had fun with your mom?" Charis asked, stepping up behind and wrapping her arms around me. I took them from the front and held them to my chest.

"I'm sure she's had loads of fun," I replied. My mother had been difficult for me to deal with as a son. She was a doting grandparent.

She pulled her arms away and went over to the dresser to grab her clothes. I didn't take my eyes off the beach. There was something about the waves that was hypnotizing. The way they lapped in at the shore, the last remnants running up the sand and forcing some of the gulls to either get their feet wet or step out of the way. Peering further out, the water looked strange - as if it were moving backwards. I blinked a few times and was going to point it out to Charis when a gull swooped down and landed on the sill right in front of me, squawking loudly and looking up with red eyes.

"What the…" I stumbled backwards, and the bird made a noise, almost like laughter, and took off again, vanishing into the sky.

"It's just a bird," Charis said, laughing. "You've never been afraid of birds before."

"Did you see its eyes?" I asked.

"No."

There was something about those eyes. Bird eyes were black, not red. Part of me knew there was a reason for it, but it was an idea I couldn't catch onto.

She finished dressing and we grabbed our bags and headed out of the hut, along a paved walkway to the hotel. It was all open-air, with a simple thatch roof to keep the rain off and plenty of ceiling fans to cool the visitors. An attendant greeted us there. He took our bags and brought them around front where the taxi would pick us up while we checked out at the front desk.

By the time we were done paying the cab had arrived and the attendant had loaded our two suitcases into the trunk. We didn't say much, and he didn't say much, because the language barrier

was too thick. He smiled and bobbed his head when I handed him some cash. That was a universal language.

A forty minute drive to the small airport, another two hours to sit together while we waited for our flight - a sixteen hour red-eye that would see Clara in our arms sometime tomorrow afternoon. We passed the time playing games on our tablet and looking at the photos we had taken. We would both have fun telling Clara all about our adventures.

The plane ride was uneventful. We flew through a couple of heavy thunderstorms that bounced us around a bit, but I had zero fear of flying and the turbulence was more like an amusement park ride. Charis got a little nauseous, but she held it together pretty well, even finding a few hours of sleep between the chaos and the calm. Still, when we finally touched down in JFK, she was ready to kiss the dirt.

I called my mother the moment the pilot said it was safe to do so. Clara picked up.

"Hello," she said, in her little chipmunk voice.

"Hello," I said, making my voice deeper and more raspy.

She laughed, not falling for it. "Daddy!" the shout hurt my ear, in the best way possible. "Are you coming to Nana's?"

"Of course, sweetie. We're at the airport. We'll be there before you can blink."

"I blinked," she said. "You're not here."

I chuckled and gave Charis the phone. There had been no service on the resort in Tahiti, so she hadn't heard Clara's voice since we'd taken off in the opposite direction. She had tears in her eyes while she talked to her.

They let us off and we were surprised to find a limo waiting to pick us up, courtesy of Nana. I expected her to dote on Clara. Treating us to something was a surprise.

My mother lived in Harlem, in a fairly decent mid-rise where crime was lower than average, and the schools were pretty good. We'd moved there right before puberty, and it was there that I had started the life of electronic crime that had brought Charis and I together, an act of carelessness that I still considered the best mistake I had ever made. I took her hand and squeezed it, thinking about the day we had met at the Museum of Natural History, when she had come to lay eyes on the chalices I had been assigned to watch over. She had been amazing then, and she was amazing now.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. The inside of the car was nearly silent, outside of the messages pouring through the radio to the driver up front.

I smiled and looked at her. “You do?”

“You always get all sappy when we visit your mom. I’ve never seen anyone else so happy to have been incarcerated.”

Of course, it hadn’t made things easy for us. I couldn’t get a job in anything that remotely touched computers, which had left my greatest asset wallowing. Instead, we survived on the salary of a Senior Security Officer for Macy’s. The pay wasn’t that bad, but we liked living in the hustle and bustle of the city.

“I wouldn’t have met you otherwise,” I replied.

She laughed. “Yup. Sappy.”

The car glided to a stop outside of the apartment and we exited while the kids outside stared at us, mouths hanging open. They hadn’t seen too many limos in their neighborhood and the fact that it didn’t drop us off and leave made it an even bigger spectacle.

We took the stairs up to the sixth floor. My mom lived in apartment sixty-six. ‘Route Sixty-six’ she always called it. She’d gone as far as to decorate with lots of relevant Americana - road signs, license plates, photos of the Grand Canyon, that kind of stuff. My mom was a little wacky.

“Anybody home,” I called out, raising my voice a few octaves. I rapped on the door and we waited, expecting to hear the pounding of small footsteps racing to greet us.

Silence.

“Hello,” I said, knocking again. “Mom?”

More silence.

I turned to Charis, the worry on her face sure to be echoing my own. I had left my key to her place in our bags. “I’ll go get the key,” I said. I felt my heart beginning to race. “Keep knocking.”

“Mom, it’s Charis,” she shouted while knocking, the desperation leaking into her voice. “Are you okay in there?”

I ran down the steps and out to the car where the driver was waiting. He had his head down, looking at his hands. He was holding my keys in them.

“How did you-“ I started to ask, but then he lifted his head. A faint spark of recognition passed through my anxious mind and it tried to put him in a specific place, at a specific time.

“Nobody is going to answer, kid,” he said. The corner of his

mouth curled into a grin, or a snarl. It could have been either.

"What do you mean?" My heart started racing faster, and my mind churned like a hurricane, trying to figure out how I knew this guy.

He tossed me the keys. "Go on up. See for yourself."

I stood there and stared at him for a few seconds, trying in vain to make the connection, and then I turned and sprinted into the building and up the stairs. I was out of breath by the time I reached the sixth floor.

Charis was gone.

The door was open.

"Charis," I said, rushing ahead.

As I neared the apartment a smell caught me and raised my concern to full-blown panic. I nearly tripped trying to make the turn into the the doorway.

I slipped on the blood.

I fell backwards onto my rear, my brain trying to process the grisly scene in front of me and failing. I tried to cry, to express the sudden, intense pain that lurched into my soul, but nothing came. Instead, I vomited into the dark red mess below me.

Somewhere in my mind, in some small piece that was still able to function in the face of grotesque catastrophe, I finally figured out where I knew that face, that smile from. In near perfect sync, a thick laugh rose through the atmosphere, pummeling me with its familiarity.

The dream. Forgotten no more.

I almost had enough time to scream when he grabbed me from behind and tugged me over to a nearby window.

"This is just the start, kid," he said through clenched teeth. "I have an eternity to make you feel every kind of pain I can imagine. Being a god, I can imagine quite a lot."

The Beast, I realized, as I felt my body lurch forward and then crash through the window. I watched the ground rising up to meet me, and everything began flooding back.

This was for you, Sarah, and for all the rest of creation.

I hope it was worth it.

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2

It started in Japan.

It had taken me almost two months to get here, no longer able to tag-along with Landon and his friends through demonic transport rifts or on the wings of angels. It had taken a number of bodies, three dozen or more, each scared when I took their consciousness from them, and confused when I released it again. I was getting good at being a spirit, but to be honest, I didn't care for it. Whatever benefits came from being able to slip from shell to shell were lost in the flood of memories I was forced to endure whenever I claimed a new form.

I just wanted to be me. As me as I could be, in this state.

I just wanted to be Rebecca.

Not Reyka, and certainly not Solen. Just Rebecca, the once-upon-a-time child of a vampire and a succubus, who thought she knew the path to true power and with it true happiness. Rebecca, who had needed one of God's own swords to pull the curtains of darkness aside and teach her the real meaning of happiness.

It hadn't been easy getting here. After they had trapped the

Beast, I had used the body I had taken - the one that had thrown aside the fiend Izak and saved everything, but had been forgotten in the shock of the aftermath - to try to catch up to Sarah and the Were. It was a futile effort. So many people, suddenly having their consciousness returned. So many others, already dead, their bodies tumbling to the earth as soon as the Beast's power fled them. In the mortal body, I couldn't make them move away from me. I couldn't make them forget I was there.

I considered abandoning the body to follow, but as a spirit I was slow unless I had something to hold onto, a purpose that propelled me forward. Landon was gone, and while the purpose remained, I had lost my beacon.

So I stayed. I tried to get through the armies of terrified humanity, but it was a waste of energy. The Beast had left Mumbai a ruin, the psyche of the people destroyed as only he could manage. It would take years to fix this place, if anything ever could. I wondered how the news would report it. An earthquake. That was my bet. There was enough rubble to justify the excuse, enough fire and destruction and death. Nobody would ever know what had really happened. The dead would stay dead. The Sleeping would continue to sleep.

Two months, but at least I was finally here. I'd been wrong about the earthquake. They'd called it an outbreak of some made up disease and quarantined *everything* . Nobody in or out. A wall of military kept it that way. I had to abandon my shell then and make my way through the vast expanse of space, little more than the thought of him trapped in there with the Beast to keep me going. I'd never believed in anything beyond myself before, but now I saw God's hand arch across the all of everything. He'd saved me from that dark demise. He put me on the path to salvation.

I just had to walk it.

I hailed a cab outside the airport, still a little awkward in the body of a short, round, Korean businessman with an odd taste for animated pornography. I preferred women because they were more familiar; a better fit, and less jarring to re-live the lives of. I would have chosen a woman, but I was afraid it would make me easier to spot. It was one thing to wander humanity as a ghost. It was another to walk right up to the Nicht Creidim.

I had no idea if they had an artifact that would allow them to see through the shell to the soul behind the wheel. There was no

way to be sure they didn't have something that could destroy me for good. I had taken Elyse by surprise, right before she had opened the door to let Landon in. Her possession had felt different from the others, like she had the ability to resist, but didn't. As though she were allowing me to control her rather than being subjugated by my power.

She was strong, that one. I knew that's why I wanted her back. Between her strength and her access to the Nicht Creidim's collection of relics, she was the only mortal on Earth who could survive through what I knew would come next.

What was that, exactly? I'd spent more than enough time trying to answer that question. The top layer was simple enough: find a way to get Landon out of the Box without allowing the Beast to escape with him. Or, find a way to destroy the Beast while he was still inside the Box. I knew he had gone in with another, Charis. I knew he loved her, and would want her to be saved too. I would try for his sake, but she wasn't my goal, he was.

How to do either of those things? I didn't know. I didn't even know where to start. I had seen Landon in Egypt. I had seen him vanish, and I had seen when he returned that he had been given something, a bracelet. Maybe whoever had given it to him could help?

First, I needed a shell. A permanent, mortal shell that could fight the Divine and make it through. That was why I had come to Japan. That was why I wanted Elyse. One step at a time.

The cab dropped me off near the front of the dock. Most mortals didn't know about the Nicht Creidim, or if they did they called them by other names that were incorrect, but close enough. This driver knew what awaited at the other end of the pier. He didn't want any part of it.

"Good luck to you, sir," he said. He was speaking Japanese, but fortunately so did my host. I had the part of his mind that allowed me to do the translation.

"Keep the change," I said, handing him a large bill from the man's wallet. Of course he would have Japanese currency, he was headed here before I took him over.

I shoved the body over across the back seat of the cab, and grabbed the handle with meaty fingers. A soft shove, the door swung open, and I waddled out. The driver didn't waste much time getting out of there, making a tight three point turn and revving

away. I stood at the mouth of the dragon and stared down its throat.

I took a deep breath and starting walking forward, retracing the steps that Landon had taken when he'd come for the sword. The Deliverer, sister to the Redeemer, which had pierced my heart and made me whole. Staring ahead into the deepening twilight with mortal eyes, I felt a weakness and vulnerability that I could barely describe. Did humans feel like this all the time? I wondered that often.

The smallest splash behind me alerted me to an attacker. Before, I would have heard or smelled him from a dozen yards out or more. Now, I had just enough time to squat beneath his attempted grapple, and then sweep his legs out with an awkward twist. The motion took him off his feet, but it also brought me off mine.

"Christ!" I shifted, trying to bring the weight under control and put myself back to my feet. I flopped onto my side and shoved with a pudgy arm, feeling the muscles complain. I had only gotten halfway up when a sneaker planted itself in my gut.

"Stay down," he said.

I stumbled to my hands and knees, lifting my head to get a look at him. A younger man, with a ring in his nose and a tattoo on the side of his face. He had short, spiked hair and big ears. "Take what you want," I said, staying still. He was a few yards away. I wanted him to come closer.

"I don't want your money," he replied.

"What do you want?"

He smiled, his teeth extending into sharp points. A vampire. It figured.

"Your blood," he said.

If he were human, I could have just dumped the Korean and taken him. He would have been a better ride. He wasn't, so I couldn't. Jettisoning the body and floating in the aether wasn't an appealing thought just yet.

He started walking towards me, but he looked confused. "This is the part where you're supposed to be afraid," he said.

"This is the part where you're going to be afraid," a voice said from somewhere in the darkness.

The vampire and I both turned our heads, seeking it out. She jumped down from the warehouse next to us, landing softly despite the twenty foot drop. Elyse.

“You’re a fool to come around here,” she said.

I didn’t know if she was talking to me, or to him. Probably him. I waited.

“Who are you?” he asked. He did look a little bit afraid.

“I’m security.” She started walking towards us. She was decked out in black, her head covered by a scarf so that only her eyes were visible. They turned my way for only a moment, but I got the feeling she knew who I was.

The vampire’s grin widened. “You’re hot, so I’m not going to kill you,” he said. “I’m going to make you my bitch.”

He really had no idea who he was dealing with. I didn’t understand how that could be? Even if his family didn’t know this was Nicht Creidim territory, they would have known to stay away.

Elyse didn’t answer. She pulled an ornate dagger from her hip and threw it at him. He didn’t even move, his eyes following the trajectory of the missile while it planted itself in his stomach. I expected the wound to begin steaming immediately, but it didn’t. Blood began running out like a river and he screamed from the pain.

“Please,” he screamed. “Please help me.” He looked down at the dagger in disbelief, and then dropped to his knees. What kind of vampire was this?

Elyse finished her approach, took hold of the dagger, and pulled it from his gut. Intestines trailed behind it and he fell over onto his stomach, dead. He didn’t turn to ash.

“What?” The word escaped me without thought.

Elyse knelt and wiped the blade off on his back, and then turned to me.

“Rebecca,” she said. “I’m glad you’ve come. We need to talk.”

I stayed on my hands and knees, looking at her. I didn’t know what to say.

“How did you know it was me?” I asked at last.

She lifted her scarf back from her head, revealing a bald scalp, her forehead carrying a fork-shaped scar that had been inlaid with gold. A small amount of blood still oozed from the wound around it.

“The secret to seeing spirits,” she said. “You aren’t the only one.”

I stared at it, my eyes wide. “Where did you learn that?”

“As you know, we have quite a collection of ancient scrolls. If Landon had known how many, I’m sure I would have met him

sooner." She held out her hand, and helped me to my feet. "If you were trying to look inconspicuous, you failed. If you were trying to look helpless, you succeeded."

I pointed at the body of the vampire. "I don't understand that."

She looked back at him and sighed. "The world is changing, Rebecca. I don't think in a good way. He's the second I've put down this week."

"Shouldn't vampires know to stay away from here?"

"The vampires do. He isn't a vampire. Not a true blood-drinker, anyway."

I was more confused. "I don't understand."

"Come," she said, taking my hand. "I'll tell you everything I know. I think perhaps we can help one another."

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She brought me into the warehouse, down into the hardened subterranean estate where she lived. The others looked at me curiously, wondering what she was doing with a mortal in tow, but they knew well enough not to question Joe's daughter.

She led me to her apartment, an open space with a huge fish tank ringing the outer walls. She made us some tea, and we sat on a soft mat in the center of the floor, sipping chamomile while we talked.

"You were going to tell me what's going on," I said, lifting the porcelain cup to my shell's mouth. The fingers barely managed to get a passable grip on the handle, and I nearly poured the drink into my lap. "Vampires that aren't vampires."

She took a delicate sip from her own cup, and then put it down next to her. "Yes. It started about two months ago. The same time as the so-called outbreak in Mumbai that made people start killing one another."

"It was the Beast."

She nodded. "I wasn't sure, but I suspected. As did father. His

exact words were, ‘I wonder if we’ll ever see the Deliverer again’. He can be a little… single-tracked… at times. The riots ended. At first I believed Landon had defeated him, but then we started hearing rumors.”

I had been single-tracked myself. All of my energy had been poured into arriving here. “Rumors?”

“That the diuscrucis were gone. Both of them. That there was a new Demon Queen, who also happened to be the daughter of Baal himself. That the Parisian archfiend was back in play, more powerful than he had ever been before, and with the demon Izak under his heel. That Hell was back on top, and defeat was inevitable without Landon to put things right.” She caught my eyes in hers, and held them in a steel gaze. “That they had broken the world.”

So much power had been funneled into the Box. A universe of energy in a Rubik’s Cube. Had our universe not been able to withstand it? “Landon trapped the Beast inside Avriel’s Box. He had to join him there to keep him contained.”

“You want to free him,” Elyse said.

I couldn’t hide it from her. She had seen into me, when I had taken her. I don’t know how, but she had. “Yes.”

“So do I.”

I didn’t understand. “Why? Why do you care about him?”

She laughed. “I don’t care about him. I care about us. Humanity. The world is broken.”

“You keep saying that. I don’t know what you mean.”

She picked up her cup, and took another soft sip of the tea. “That… thing… I just killed. Where do you think it came from?”

“I would have said the same place all vampires come from, but you’ve already said he wasn’t one.”

She shrugged. “Technically, he was, I suppose. He wasn’t always. He changed.”

“What do you mean, changed? As in, from human to vampire?”

“Yes. It isn’t just vampires. People are changing into other things too. Some of them, I don’t know what they are. I’ve never seen it before.”

I still didn’t believe it. “You’re telling me that humans are turning into demons?”

“Yes and no. They’re taking on the characteristics of the Divine, we think according to their genetics, though there may be some

other factors that we haven't considered yet. For the most part they're still human, but they have power. Divine power."

"I would think you'd be in favor," I said. "The whole goal of the Nicht Creidim is to use Divine power against them."

"To save humanity. Not to have it become the very thing we fight. These people are abominations. To kill them is to free them."

"So, that's why you're glad I came? Because you think Landon can stop this somehow?"

"I know how you feel about him. When you took over my body, I could feel it too. A strange devotion. I knew from the rumors he had gone missing, which meant you would be searching for a way to help him. You understand some of the things our family has collected, and in your current state, it made sense that you would seek me out again. I'd seen the writings about spirits, and so I made an Eye of Third Sight and waited for you.

"The changelings started appearing soon after the Beast was trapped inside the Box. We think there's too much power concentrated into too little space, and it's having massive side effects on our world. We need to release the energy."

"If you release Landon, you release the Beast," I said.

""Of course, which is why we can't just take the Box and open it up. Releasing the Beast would be worse than dealing with changelings, which is why I was waiting for you."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Sarah."

I almost choked on my laughter. "Sarah hates me," I said. "How in the world can I help you with her?"

"I don't need you to make friends with her", Elyse replied. "I need you to get through her. I can't get near her, you know. All of the things we've collected, and we have nothing to protect us. There aren't supposed to be any true diuscrucis, so neither side has created anything to fight them. I may have the genetics to make me resistant to the Divine, but as you are aware, I'm not impervious."

"I was never sure if I took you by force, or by invitation," I said.

She smiled, but didn't offer me a clue. "She can Command me, if she sees me as a threat. These days, she sees everything as a threat, but I don't blame her for that. Both sides are after the Box, because they believe they are best suited to protect it. The fact is that they would prefer if Landon remains in there with the Beast for all of eternity."

“What about the Nicht Creidim?”

She took another sip of tea, finishing the small cup and placing it off to the side of the mat. “Joe wants the Box. He believes he can use the power to destroy all of the Divine. An ethereal EMP. Considering the energy he could unleash, I think he can do it. He doesn’t realize that it will be more like a nuclear blast than a magnetic pulse. The power will go everywhere, and expose us even more. He’ll destroy the Divine, only to turn us into them.”

I was beginning to understand my place on the board. I was the Queen to Landon’s King, able to traverse the field while he was pinned down. Sarah couldn’t Command me, because I had been transformed. God still held dominion over all things, and He had put me on this mission, I knew. He wanted me to save him.

“Okay. Let’s say I agree, and we work together to find Sarah. Let’s say we get close to her. Then what?”

“Simple. We steal the Box.”

I wasn’t expecting that. “Steal it? Why? Sarah has more reason to want to free Landon than anyone. We should work with her.”

Elyse laughed. “Does she? How do you know? She is a true diuscrucis. Her ultimate loyalty will be to herself. Think of what she can do, if she finds a way to harness the power of the Box to her own ends. Power that no one can have without tearing the world apart, even if by accident. No, we need to take the Box.”

“And bring it where?”

“Wherever the Beast came from in the first place.”

I closed my eyes, catching the memories. I had followed his instructions to bring Sarah through the rift. A special rift that was the only link between this world and the one he had been trapped in. You didn’t go to it, you called it and it came to collect you. “I can’t open the rift anymore, and even if I could, it’s a one-way trip.”

“Not so. The archfiend Gervais has created a permanent connection to the Beast’s original prison. He’s been seeking a means to steal the power that remains there in hopes that it will lead him to a method of taking what is trapped in the Box itself. He doesn’t just want to be the minion of a god. He wants to be a god.”

Gervais. He had been granted a gift of power from the Beast, which was the only reason he was still standing. Of course, like any good demon he had been given a taste, and now he wanted it all.

“I can’t get past Gervais, especially now that he has Izak back under his control. Besides, you didn’t say anything about how this is

going to help Landon? Even if you could put the power of the Box back into the Beast's prison, Landon will still be trapped with him."

"Do you take me for a fool, Rebecca? All the information I've shared with you has come from a single source. One who has proven their reliability, and whose goals are similar to ours. He's given me assurances that there is a way to free the object of your infatuation, and to remove the Beast's power from play."

There was silence for a few minutes, while I considered her words. Assurances? There were no assurances among demons, not in anything. Still, I had been guided to this place by something so much bigger than me. How could I have been brought back, only to be led astray?

"Fine. What's your offer?"

Elyse smiled. Was I making a mistake even considering this? "A partnership. You get to use my body to help save the diuscrucis. I get to return the power of the Beast to where it belongs and make things right again. We both get to stop Joe from polluting the world with creatures that shouldn't be, and Gervais from claiming power that isn't his."

Stopping Joe was one thing. Gervais was a different monster altogether. One that came with an equally powerful slave. "Do you have a plan to defeat the archfiend?"

"Not defeat, no. A different plan."

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“Do you see him?” Charis asked.

We were hunkered down behind an ambulance, peering around the corner in search of the gunman that had opened fire on us.

“No. Maybe he gave up?” I stuck my head out a little more, and a bullet bounced off the hood of the van, nearly ricocheting into my face. I ducked my head back in. “Wishful thinking.”

The Beast. I knew it was him, though it had taken a little while to realize. It seemed as if every time we played this game the memories returned faster. That I knew who I really was, and Charis knew who she really was.

Not that it had helped.

Our power had been his power, and when we poured it all into the Box, we had lost control of it. He was the closest thing to a god here, for real. We were little more than mortals. The only difference was that we couldn’t die, not permanently anyway. He could catch us, have his way with us, destroy us in infinite ways, and we’d always come back.

There was no way to measure time here. No way to know how

long it had been going on. The one thing we'd learned - maybe the only thing we'd learned - was that the longer we stayed alive, the more we remembered. It would take a lot to convince me that was a good thing.

"We should just let him hit us, and get on with it," I said. I didn't really favor the thought of recalling the other countless deaths we had suffered at his hands. Calculated, measured deaths. He was building up the pain the way any good torturer would. The only consolation I could find was that he would run out of ways to slaughter us once a few thousand years had gone by. At least, I hoped he would.

"Come on," Charis said. She grabbed my hand and pulled me away, towards a dark alley.

I tugged against her. "We did that last time," I said. The memory came back to me, and I shivered. He had eviscerated Charis, and splattered me in her blood before decapitating me. I looked around the street, and led her to the next parked car, bullets pinging off the sidewalk behind us.

My mind went back to Avriel, the archangel who had spent thousands of years in this place with the demon Abaddon. Time had no real meaning here, but the pain and the memories were real enough to make it meaningful. I could only imagine what he had endured, both while he was in the Box, and after he had been released. All of that torture and suffering, and not only had I extended it for him, but once he was finally freed, I had gotten him killed.

Of course, Avriel had power of his own. He had said they battled, the demon and him. He hadn't always lost. We weren't so lucky.

"Where to?" she asked. We stayed crouched behind an old Camaro, and I searched the buildings across the street for his position.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "He's going to come for us soon."

"What do you mean?"

She hadn't seen it yet, which surprised me. "How much do you remember?" I asked.

Tears sprung to her eyes in an instant. "Don't ask me that," she said.

I didn't blame her reaction. "Each time, I remember a little more. Each time, he lets us live just a fraction longer. He wants us

to remember. He wants us to relive the pain, over and over again. I remember the last time. It will be over soon."

She laughed. A heavy, defeated laugh. "Over? This is never going to be over. You and I both know that. He'll kill us, and we'll start again."

I peeked out at the buildings across from us again. The longer we lived, the fewer times he could end us. It wasn't much, but at least it would hurt less.

"Dante will find a way to get us out," I said, trying to convince both of us. "Sarah won't give up either."

"Sarah? Don't try to make me feel better by pinning our hopes on her. You know what she is, and what will happen."

I grabbed her arm and pulled her down two more cars, oblivious to the bullets. "It doesn't have to be that way. She held up when Josette died. She kept it together when Gervais took Izak. She saved everything."

Charis turned me around so she could look me in the eye. "I'm not saying she didn't do a good job, but that was then. This is now. Who's going to keep her grounded? I don't have much faith in her being on her own. I'm sorry, love, but that's the truth."

A glint of steel was the only warning. I threw Charis to the side, getting her away from the sword that sliced down towards her head. It wasn't Ross, but one of his creations, a grotesque clone of Charis, with a twisted and mangled face, covered in bleeding sores. She hissed when the blow came up empty, and jumped at me.

I was only mortal here, but I still knew how to fight. I sidestepped her punch, grabbed her arm, and brought a knee up into her stomach. I smelled the fetid stench of the air bursting from her lungs, and nearly paused to vomit. Instead, I twisted the arm until it snapped, and shoved her so she was between me and the car. I heard the gunfire, and the body shook while it caught the bullets that had been fired at me. I found Charis on her knees, and pointed to a storefront. We inched towards it, using the creature as a shield.

It had to be time, I knew. He would be here any second, the pissed-off smile on his face, his anger at being stuck here unable to be contained. He would kill us again, after some kind of torture. He liked to kill Charis first, to make me watch her die. Sometimes he would add my mother, or a child for the two of us. That had been his first effort, and little did he know, it had been the most painful.

We reached the store, and Charis opened the door and held it for me. Once we were in I dropped the corpse and we scrambled deep enough inside so that the shooter couldn't get an angle. We would have a few seconds of quiet.

"There has to be something we can do," Charis said. "How can our power hold him, contain him, if we don't have any?"

That was a new idea. One we hadn't had before. Was the Beast making a mistake by letting us live for longer periods, or was it intentional?

"Hold that thought," I said, as if that could bring it to us sooner.

"Good morning, children," the Beast said. He appeared from nowhere in his pinstriped suit and sunglasses, wearing his crap-eating grin and holding his pocket watch. "I'm sorry I'm late. Honestly, I thought my Charis would get you, or at least slow you down. Either you're getting more resourceful, or I'm getting lax."

"Go to hell," Charis said, spitting on him.

He was deliberate, reaching into a pocket and pulling out a monogramed handkerchief to wipe the spittle away. "I tried to go to Hell. You stuck me in here instead." He lifted a hand and clenched his fingers together while twisting his wrist.

I heard her spine break.

Charis cried out in pain, and fell to the ground, paralyzed.

The Beast looked at me, the anger obvious. "You and your bitches." He drew a line in the air, and her skin spread apart down her arms. She screamed louder, but kept her eyes on him, defiant.

"You can kill us as often as you want," I said. "You aren't getting out of here."

He laughed. I hated it. "You've said that four times now, and you still don't remember my answer."

I tried to remember that part. "Why don't you tell me again?"

He opened up more cuts on Charis' body, leaving her panting, with tears in her eyes. She refused to look away from him, fighting the pain with her own anger.

"Do you really think I didn't make arrangements, kid? As small as your odds of getting me in here were, I'm not stupid enough to chance getting stuck forever. I know how to get out of here. It'll take me some time, but I have plenty to keep me entertained."

He laughed again, while I tried to think through what he had just said. The words were familiar, and now I remembered that he had said them before.

“Ah, now it comes back to you,” he said. He looked over at Charis, writhing on the ground, a pool of blood below her, and then he looked at his watch. “I’m afraid I’ll have to cut this short.”

He turned his wrist again, and her stomach erupted in a geyser of blood and guts. I tried to close my eyes, but he didn’t let me.

“Oh no, kid. You’re going to watch. Every time. I hope it hurts.”

It did. Every time. I would have thought the repetition would make me numb, but it only made it worse. It was hard enough to watch someone you loved die once. Try doing it again and again, stuck in a twisted Groundhog Day.

I felt a small sense of relief that she was out of it for another round. “How are you going to do it?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“Get out of here. How can you do it? I think you’re lying.” I remembered now. He’d told me he was confident he would get out. He may have even told me how.

He smiled. “I’m not going to tell you this time. You’re getting the hang of this a little too easily.”

He broke my neck.

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“Are you ready?” I asked.

We were still in her apartment, but we had cleared the tea set, and now we sat on our knees facing one another. She looked comfortable in the position, but my shell’s body was straining from the weight pressed down on it.

“I’m ready,” she replied.

We had spent another hour going over ground rules. The most important one was that she needed to lead the way through the warehouse. She had some things she thought might come in handy, so the so-called ‘armory’ was going to be our first stop. Of course, there were things in there that even she wasn’t technically allowed to take, so it was going to be a fun exercise getting out with the stuff. It didn’t help that Joe was already ticked at her for suggesting his plan was foolish. She was certain that if she were caught going rogue, her father wouldn’t have too many qualms about either killing her, or imprisoning her. Fighting the Divine meant having the steel will needed to make those kinds of sacrifices.

I closed my shell’s eyes and took a deep breath, nervous and

unconvinced that Elyse was dealing from a straight deck. There was no better choice though, so I detached myself from him. As always, it was an experience with a measure of pain attached; every part of my soul catching fire at once for just an instant. I felt my complexities fall away from me, and my motivation reduced to only a single directive. Help Landon.

Elyse was still, the Eye of Third Sight glimmering on her forehead. She was looking at me.

“Amazing,” she said. “I haven’t seen one outside of a body.” She reached her hand up towards me. “Do you feel that?”

I didn’t feel anything. Was she touching me? I floated in her direction, a gossamer thread on a puff of air, drawing closer and closer. Her eyes followed me, until I was under her nose, and flowing down her mouth.

I could have taken her then. I could have settled my soul over hers, and gained her body and mind, but I didn’t. For this first part, she needed to be the driver. Instead, I settled for tapping into her, so I could at least see what she saw. I don’t really know how I did it, or how I knew to do it. In that state it was more instinct than understanding.

The Korean was still kneeling in front of her, and his eyes began to flutter as he regained himself. I felt Elyse moving. She got to her feet and went over to a wall with a pair of katana mounted to it. She lifted one from the rack, eased it from its scabbard, and returned to the man. She knelt down in front of him, positioning the sword angled up from the ground. Before he could open his eyes, she reached out and pulled him onto it, impaling him through the heart. He died without a sound.

“He was impure.”

That was all she said. She didn’t have to explain to me, or make an excuse. He was a means to a more important end; his death was a trifle compared to our needs. On the other hand, was she suggesting that I had made him impure by controlling him? Didn’t that make her impure? Would she commit seppuku once our work was done, or was she as hypocritical as I had found most humans to be?

She took the body and lifted it, showing a surprising amount of strength in her lithe frame. She held him over her shoulder, careful to keep his blood from getting onto her clothes, and carried him into her bedroom. It was an interesting place, with a foam mattress

on the floor and random artwork covering nearly every inch of the walls that the fish tank didn't occupy; a menagerie of artistic renditions of the naked form, in every style and medium I could think of.

The north wall had a fireplace, and it was there that she dropped the body with a slight grunt. Only then did she remove the sword. "Less blood this way," she said, talking me through her actions.

"*The artwork* ," I said. I had never spoken to my host before. It felt strange, the words more of a vibration than sound.

"The human body is an amazing thing. Look around at these works, and consider the years of observation it took to create such masterpieces. The study of every muscle, every movement." She pointed at one that was little more than a few thick brush strokes on a white canvas. Still, it was undeniably human. "It is easy to explain something in a thousand strokes, but what about in three? I look at these, I study them, and I learn. My strengths and weaknesses, my successes and failures. It is very important to know yourself. The better you do, the more powerful you become."

"*God created humans,* " I said. "*You want to destroy God.* "

She laughed, and then walked back out into her living room. She opened a closet and reached up onto a shelf, bringing down a small wooden box. "God didn't create man," she said. "Not originally. The science makes that plain as day, for anyone who chooses not to be ignorant. No, God came here. He discovered us. He made the angels in *our* likeness. In their jealousy, they destroyed us. He punished those who did it, and gave us new life. That is the true story of creation. That is why He is the enemy."

I knew her words were untrue. I had been touched by Him, and I had felt His goodness. He had changed me, in every way my soul could be changed. "*That isn't how the Divine understand it to be* ," I said.

She opened the box, and took a small ruby from it. It was etched with demonic runes. "I wouldn't expect that your masters would want you to know the truth. That is why we fight, Rebecca. We are the rightful owners of this world, not you or your kind." She couldn't disguise her anger and hatred. "It doesn't matter now. We need to stop the poison first, and then we can move on."

"*I didn't ask to be what I am* ," I said. I don't know why, but I felt like I needed to defend myself.

“Few enough of us ask to be what we are. That doesn’t change it. Your guilt lies in your progenitors.”

She took the stone and brought it back into the bedroom. She held the crystal, rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger so that the runes began to glow, and then threw it into the fire on top of the dead man. The crystal erupted in a geyser of hellfire that reduced the body to ash within the few seconds that it burned.

“Only the most powerful demons can control hellfire,” she said. “But did you know that they make these for their loyal servants, to give them a taste of that power?”

She turned away from it and went out and over one doorway, into her bathroom. It was a massive room, with a large closet, a shower, and a jacuzzi. The fish tank wound its way through here as well. Small sharks combed the bottom of the tank, while a ray skated the top.

Elyse pulled off the ninja clothes she had been wearing. Passing a full-length mirror, I could see all of the kit she wore in rings and necklaces and hip chains that she kept hidden from sight. She was also covered in tattoos and scars, some that had been carved and filled like the Eye, others that were inked in demonic runes or seraphim scripture. Naked, I could almost feel the stolen power radiating from her.

“*What does it all do?* ” I asked.

“Protection,” she said. “I don’t have anything of my own but the natural strength of my muscle, and the understanding of physics to turn my body into a weapon. Against a vampire, that is usually enough. Against an archfiend or a seraph, I wouldn’t last a blink.”

She grabbed a thong, a lacy bra, a pair of skinny jeans, a black cami, a leather jacket and calf-high black boots. She left the knife she had used on the vampire in the closet. “We’ve got better tools than that.”

On her way out, she picked a pair of sunglasses from a nearby shelf, and wrapped a bandana around her bald head to hide the Eye. Passing the mirror again, I could see that nearly all of the tats, scars, and jewelry was hidden from view.

“*You’ve done this before* ,” I said.

“I’m Joe’s favorite retriever,” she replied.

We left the bathroom and her apartment, stepping out into the carpeted hallway and turning right. Elyse walked with confidence, her head up and her jaw out, challenging anyone who might

happen by to question her activity. As we reached the corner of the hallway, Joe came around it, leaving her to spin out of his way, grab his arm, and pin it tight against his back before he could react.

"Ahh, nice move, darling," he said with a laugh. "I should have been more careful."

Elyse leaned up and kissed the back of his neck. "You should father. You never know what might be wandering these halls."

She let him go, and he turned around, looking at her with intense brown eyes. "In here? Not likely. The diuscrucis might have been able to pull it off, but they're gone. Why are you headed for the armory, anyway? Shouldn't you be in bed?"

She didn't hesitate. "There was another changeling outside, a vampire. I was going to get the stone and make sure the area was clear."

Joe waved his arm. "Don't worry about it. I'll tell Reza to have Yu do a sweep before he comes in. Get some rest. I have a lead on that girl, Sarah, I want you to check out in the morning."

Elyse cocked her head. "Sarah? What kind of lead?" I could tell she was faking. She already knew something about it. But how much?

"I'll tell you in the morning, sweetheart. It can wait until then."

"Tell me now. Maybe I can do some research ahead of time. It will help me fall asleep."

Joe pursed his lips in consideration, and then shook his head. "I know you. You'll be up all night instead. I need you rested for this one. None of this stuff makes you impervious to fatigue."

I could feel her getting angry, her heart beating faster. "Father, I'll be fine. You know I don't need much rest."

He turned and started walking away. "In the morning. Good night, Elle."

"Stubborn pain in the ass," she said under her breath. "Good night, father."

She stood there seething until he had gone, and then made a beeline to the armory. It was around the corner and down a quiet hall, behind a huge steel door that required both fingerprint and retina scans for access. She stuck her finger in the hole and bent her face to the level of the eyeball scanner, and the door clanked and swung inward. She ducked inside and pushed it back closed.

When she turned around, all of the lights blinked on, revealing a long square room. It was sterile and barren, an empty room with a

cold steel floor, ringed with hundreds of cabinets built into the walls. It looked more like a morgue than an armory.

"*Do you know what you came for?* " I asked.

She answered by walking to the back of the room, and reaching up to pull open a higher shelf. Inside was a Roman spatha. She lifted it from the black velvet pad it rested on and showed it to me.

"*What is it made of?* "

Both the hilt and the blade were the same dull, plain, matte black, though the hilt also had black leather wrapped around it for grip. Etched lines ran across the blade itself, a smooth rhythm of letters from opposing alphabets.

"I don't know," she said. "It is believed to have been forged from the ore of a meteorite, by a Roman blacksmith who then went on to gift it to Augustus Caesar. The runes and scripture were added later, when the blade was gifted by Tiberius Caesar to one of his greatest generals, who also happened to be Awake. He convinced an archfiend and a seraph to etch the blade, using another Divine artifact to glamour the weapon, and keep the truth of the work from being known to either side."

"*I take it he was a Nicht Creidim?* "

"Of course. This blade is one of our most prized possessions, for obvious reasons."

A sword that could kill both angels and demons. I could imagine how thankful Landon would be for a weapon like that.

She turned it over in her hand, showing me a dark stone that was resting in the pommel. She held the blade up and let her pinkie brush against it. Everything but the stone vanished. She put it in her pocket.

"*Where did it go?* "

"Heaven and Hell aren't the only places out there," Elyse said. "There are many places close to this one. There are many places to hide things. This particular bauble came from a djinn."

She put her hand up into the same shelf one more time. It was above her head, but she seemed to know exactly where everything was placed. She took down a brown leather glove that looked too big for her tiny hands. Stitching of demonic runes twisted and turned all around it. She slipped it on, and it looked as if it shrunk to fit her. "It can glamour anything it touches."

She made her way over to another drawer on the south wall, bending down to pull it open. It was filled with all kinds of

throwing blades. There were two distinct rows, one for seraph and one for demons. She took a half dozen knives from each side, and tucked them into pockets sewn inside her boots.

Then she went to a third drawer and removed three more of the red crystals that had exploded into hellfire. “Father is going to be pissed at me for taking these,” she said.

“*More pissed than for taking the sword? ”*

She laughed. “Not a chance. Just one more thing to collect.”

She made her way back to the front, and opened a shelf near the door.

“One of our newest additions. Landon destroyed most of them, so they are incredibly rare.”

She reached into the back and lifted a silver chain. As it became taut, it pulled its attachment out and left it swaying in front of her. A crystal amulet filled with a red, viscous smoke. I had seen it before, when Merov had put it around my neck as a birthday present.

“*Why do you have this? ”* I asked. The amulet was made for demons, not humans.

“It’s an insurance policy. When a human breaks the crystal and drinks the blood, they’re able to regenerate for a short time. A few hours. At least, that’s what my brother Kelvin said. He’s our top researcher.”

“You haven’t tried it?”

She put the chain over her head, and tucked the amulet below her cami. “Like I said, it’s very rare. We can’t go wasting it just to see if we’re right. Kelvin has a lot of experience. I trust his opinion.”

Seeing one of them again made me uneasy. It was a reminder of a different place, a different time, when I had betrayed Landon after he had been so kind to me, all in my lust for power.

Elyse checked her other gear one more time, making sure she wasn’t missing anything, and then went back to the door. She had to run her finger and eyes through it to get out too. She backed away as the door swung in.

Joe was standing behind it.

“Didn’t I tell you to go to bed?” he asked.

I could feel Elyse’s heart rate increase, and she lunged forward and threw a heavy punch into her father’s face. He was caught off-guard, and he stumbled backwards, giving her time to pull an ordinary knife I didn’t even know she had and press it to his neck.

“Elle?” Joe was confused, but not afraid.

“I’m sorry, father,” she said. “Your way is going to ruin this world. I’m going on my own. Now, tell me what you know about Sarah.”

Joe shook his head. “You always were stubborn,” he said. “Fine. I’ll tell you.” He let his body relax, and Elyse started to relax with him.

“*No* ,” I said, all too familiar with this trick.

Elyse was strong, but she was young. Joe’s shove sent her backwards, where she hit hard against the wall, the knife clattering to the floor. He was on her in an instant, his own fists pummeling her body with sharp blows that threatened to break her ribs.

“I won’t kill you,” he said, “but you need to learn a little more respect.”

I didn’t ask her for control. I took it. All at once I became flooded with her memories. It was my second time through them, and so they didn’t cause much pain. Within an instant I could feel my heart beating, and the blood flowing through living veins.

Joe’s next punch came in, and I angled my forearm to push it aside, into the solid wall. I had always been fast, and in a body like Elyse’s, I was even faster. I caught the blow from the other side and turned my arms, wrapping his up and twisting it at the elbow until it threatened to break. He grunted and wrinkled his forehead in pain and anger.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” he said. He backed up a step and threw a foot. I let go of his arm and sidestepped, and then moving in and smacking him hard in the chest, knocking the wind out of him.

“Sarah,” I said. I could feel Elyse observing, but there was nothing she could do. She could see spirits, but she could only protect herself from the outside.

“Elle, the Box has the power to destroy all of the Divine. We can put an end to them, a total end.” He coughed and choked between the words, slumping down against the wall, accepting his defeat. He held his arm across his chest, keeping weight off it.

“We’ll become the Divine,” I said, knowing what she would say. “It’s already started happening. That isn’t why we’re here.”

“We’ll have the power of the Divine,” he replied. “Isn’t that what we’ve always been after? Isn’t that why we collect all of their artifacts? You can’t deny that they are superior to us in every way.”

I stopped and stood there, not sure how to respond.

"The vampire changelings, they don't need to drink human blood to survive. They feel the compulsion because of the way their genes change, but it can be controlled. In exchange they get increased stamina, strength, longevity, intellect. Who wouldn't want that?"

"They aren't human," I said, my voice little more than a whisper. "Isn't that enough?" Humans were inferior, but there was something to that inferiority that was appealing. So few resources to work with, and yet they still managed to thrive.

"No," he said. "It isn't."

I bent down and picked up the knife. "Tell me what you know about Sarah," I said. In the past it would have been a Command, but my Commands didn't work anymore.

"Fine," he said. "I'll tell you because I think you can get to her, but keep an eye on your back Elle. Once you have the Box, I'll do whatever it takes to get it back from you."

"You're welcome to try," I said. I stood over him, holding the knife and waiting.

"New York. She's in New York. Montauk. She's living like a mortal, and keeping her signature disguised. The only reason we found her is because she slipped up in her web browsing, of all things. Our sister in the NSA caught an encoded and encrypted message on a Tor message forum. She's been in communication with Ulnyx, the Great Were that the diuscrucis befriended."

That was an interesting development. I had assumed the Were would catch up to her. What I hadn't considered is that they would work together. "You're sure it's her?"

He nodded. "We don't have a precise location, but the IP address block was Montauk. You want to find her, be my guest. I'll deal with your insolence after I get the Box."

For just a moment, the idea to kill him crossed my mind. Reyka would have done it and not cared. Reyka was dead, lost in the power of God's Blade. Joe was defenseless, unarmed, and not threatening. Besides, he was Elyse's problem.

"I'll deal with you after I get the Box," I said. I leaned in and kissed his cheek. I figured it was what Elyse would have done. Then I turned and walked away.

He didn't try to stop me.

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6

It was a long flight from Kyoto to New York. We touched down nearly twenty eight hours after the confrontation with Joe. I had given Elyse control back for some of the trip, so that we could discuss all of the various tools, markings, and scars she was wearing. I had her memories, but trying to sift through them for details was a dull waste of time. It was easier to just have her explain what she was capable of.

Quite a lot, it seemed. She wasn't invincible, and she certainly couldn't withstand damage the way a Divine could, but she had a laundry list of tricks up her sleeve that would come in handy more than once, I was sure. She had one trick that was naturally born into her, because she was fully mortal; Divine couldn't See her.

It made it a lot easier to get into and out of the airports, where there were always Divine stationed to keep an eye on one another. It was true I could have managed it on my own in my ghost form, but Elyse's body fit me like a tailored glove, her lithe strength and balance superior to any of the forms I had taken before. She was the best shell I could have wanted, and I was grateful to have succeeded

on that front.

We traveled light, carrying a single backpack filled with the items that wouldn't make it through security, most of which were sharp. I had used the glove on them before we'd gone through, so while the machines had shown the truth of our cargo, the humans watching them had no idea. All they'd seen were a bunch of metal figurines. I was a collector, after all.

Once we landed, I wandered through the parking garage for a while, until I spotted a valet parking a red Porsche that looked like it wanted to be driven. I asked Him for forgiveness as I approached the attendant, a young man with an acne scarred face and straw hair.

"Excuse me," I said, trying to sound sexy instead of threatening. I could see him shake, clearly startled, before he turned around.

"Can I help you?" he asked. His face turned red, and his eyes made their way up and down Elyse's body. I couldn't blame him, even the most pious seraph would have trouble ignoring it.

"Yes. I think I locked my keys in my car. Can you help me?" I pointed down the row towards a random car.

"Uh… Yeah, okay." He looked down at the fob for the Porsche, searching for the button to lock the doors.

That was when I hit him in the temple. Hard, but not too hard. He crumpled to the ground like a bag of meat. I lifted him under the shoulders and leaned him up against the car next to us.

"My apologies," I said, taking the keys from his hand and giving him a quick kiss on the lips. He was out cold, but maybe he could feel it in his subconscious.

Sliding behind the wheel, I felt a sense of exhilaration to be able to drive again. It hadn't been that long in terms of time, but it felt like forever. I started the car and whipped it backwards, then peeled out through the parking lot. I almost careened right into an oncoming Mercedes, having to slam on the brakes and twist the wheel to avoid it. I had forgotten that I was as mortal, and nobody was going to move out of the way for me.

The other thing I had forgotten, because I had never kept a shell too long, was that my body was human, and needed to rest. I couldn't keep going indefinitely without breaking down, and after an hour on the road that found me still on the west end of Long Island, I knew I needed to stop to sleep.

I pulled the car off the highway and rode along the side streets

until I happened upon a Holiday Inn. My eyes were feeling heavy, and my concentration was fading; both feelings I hadn't experienced in a long time. As a vampire, I would tire when I was hungry, or if I had to be out in the sun. Otherwise, I didn't waste time asleep.

Getting out of the car, I had another sensation that I wasn't used to. I was hungry, and not for blood. There was a McDonald's across the street from the hotel, and I decided I would grab a bite to eat there right after I checked in.

The woman at the desk was friendly enough, though she did give me a look because I had taken off the jacket. Swirls and scars ran down both arms to the cuff, in intricate patterns that any artist would have been amazed by. She just seemed disgusted.

"Room 203," she said, handing back my credit card and the room key. One more crooked glance, and I was off to the room to drop off the jacket, and then head across the street. I checked a wall clock as I passed by. Eleven o'clock.

I found the stairs, and then the room, using the card to get in. Once I had entered, I put the backpack down on the bed and unzipped it, returning the knives to their spots in the boots and putting the knife Elyse had used on Joe back into its compartment in the sleeve of the leather. That had been a great trick. Once I was re-armed, I went back out of the hotel and across to the burger place.

I was a vampire. I had never eaten fast food before, though I knew about it from television. My most intimate knowledge of the place was to avoid the blood of humans who were regular patrons, because it would taste of their poor diet. Elyse's stomach was grumbling though, and there was nowhere else nearby to sate its hunger. At least I could cede control to her if I was that disgusted by the meal.

It was quiet inside, the only patron another traveler who looked like he was resigned to the choice as well. He stared down at his burger, taking a bite, grabbing a few fries, and taking another bite. It was almost enough to make me turn around and walk out.

I stayed because I needed Elyse, and more importantly I needed her body, even more than she needed my possession. I stepped up to the counter, set to order a meal large enough to keep us going for another twenty-four hours if needed. The cashier was talking to someone else in the back, and pointing to a spill on the floor. He

turned to face me, and froze.

The look was too frightened to be one of admiration. Could he see me? Did he know what I was? I didn't have much time to wonder, because I felt a wave of hot breath wash over the back of my neck.

"You'll do," the voice said from behind me. A clawed hand grabbed my left wrist from behind.

I took a deep breath and shook my head. "I recommend you let me go, dog. I'm hungry, and not in the mood to deal with a mongrel like you."

Another huff of fetid air, followed by a soft growl. "Not scared of me, eh? Come on then sweetheart. Give it your best shot."

The machismo was familiar. Another changeling? Or the real thing? There was an easy way to find out. I stepped backward, stomping the heavy riding boot down on the were's foot and being rewarded with the crunch of bone. He started to howl, but I used his grip on my wrist as leverage to turn myself around and slam him in the head with my elbow. The blow made him let go, and knocked him backwards. He fell to all fours and looked up at me, his damage already healing.

"Not bad," he said. "You'll be a fun one."

He didn't back down, so I was going to assume he was the real thing. Even so, he was being incredibly brazen. I reached into the pocket of the jeans, finding the black stone and taking it out. It grew warm in my hand, and when I thought about the spatha, it materialized in place. The were was on his way, claws aiming to take me apart, leaving me almost no time to react. I ducked and twisted, using the weapon to smack his hands away. He crashed into the counter and over, sending the cashier running.

I had the blade ready by the time he came again, and he lost his left hand on the way by. He shrieked in pain, and watched it begin to steam.

"What the hell?" he asked. "You aren't a seraph. That isn't a seraph's sword." His eyes were wide. He knew what would happen. It was inevitable.

"It's better than that," I replied. "Well, worse for you. Better for me." I walked up to him and kicked him in the head. He tumbled over, howled one last time, and turned to dust. I was right, he had been the real thing.

I turned back to the counter, rendered into nothing but splinters

after the were had gone through it. The employees had fled, so I returned the sword to wherever, and then grabbed a few burgers and some fries from the rack. I had my eye on the door when I remembered I would need some hydration, so I took a cup and filled it with soda. I walked out without looking back, giving a small wave to the other diner when I passed him. He was crouched under the table, a puddle of urine pooling around his leg.

"You're safe now," I said.

I was going to get a good night's sleep.

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7

We were in a jungle. At least, I think it was a jungle. Dense vegetation surrounded us, thick canopies of trees hid us from the sunlight, and it was raining. Even if it wasn't a jungle, it sure felt like one.

"Do you think we lost him?" Charis asked.

We were sitting together behind the massive trunk of some tree or other, trying to catch our breath. We had managed to slip the wolves he had sent after us when we had fallen into a river and let it wash us downstream. I could still hear them howling in the night. I could hear him whistling.

"For a minute, maybe," I said. "But this is all part of the game. He's been toying with us for how long now?" I had lost track of how many times we had died. It had to be in the hundreds. At first, I had thought I would remember each one, but now I only remembered the pain, and the fear.

"I don't know. I've lost track." She sighed. "I don't want him to catch us again."

It didn't matter. We both knew he would. Maybe that was the

point of this. Keep chasing us, keep catching us, keep killing us until we were nothing but broken souls. He wasn't just out for revenge, he wanted to destroy us - in heart, soul, body, and spirit.

"What do you remember?" I asked. We had done this every time, recapping what we could capture from our previous go-rounds in the Box. The memories had been coming faster for a while, but just when I thought we had them, they would ricochet away like a rubber band.

"I remember Clara," she said. "He gave us a daughter to torture us with."

That was the first memory. Somehow, he had discovered how much it had hurt me, and so Clara had been coming back, subjected to more suffering and agony, tortured in front of both of us. Watching someone torture a child was beyond disturbing. When it was your own, even if it wasn't real, it was the truest form of anguish I could imagine.

Charis was crying, her body shaking from her sobs. "I underestimated everything about this," she said. I could feel my own tears welling up, mirroring hers. We were both trying to be strong for the other, but the truth was that his efforts were succeeding.

We *were* breaking.

"What else? Think Charis. We put him in here. We're holding him in here. How? How can he have all of the control, if we're keeping him trapped?"

Those were the questions we tried to commit to our minds, to ask one another every time we came back. I knew there had to be an answer, that we should be able to do something against him. It didn't make sense that his power could be absolute, because if it was he would be able to escape.

She wiped her eyes and set her jaw. "Our power was his power. We don't have anything on our own."

"That can't be true. We're Divine. Diuscrucis. We have the blood of angels, demons, and humans in our veins. That has to count for something."

I heard barking echoes through the growth. They were getting closer.

"We were the only ones who could absorb his power," she said. "We were the only ones who could use it."

I nodded, my mind racing along that path. "So we should be

able to use it, shouldn't we? It's the same power. We're just in a different place."

She smiled. "Yes, I think that's it. We need to remember that. Come on." She got to her feet and grabbed my arm. We ran through the greenery, pushing past thick, heavy plants and through brush and bushes. The snarling and barking of the wolves was getting louder.

"Why should we run?" I asked.

"We need to last as long as we can," she replied. "We need to remember."

His power was our power. We could take his power. We could use his power. I kept repeating the words like a mantra, committing it not only to my mind, but to my soul. An ingrained message, an instinct. We needed to do better than to run. We needed to be able to fight.

We pressed on, dodging trees, seeking another escape. The wolves couldn't be far back, and now I could hear the laughter carried on the wind. He knew we were running. He was amused.

"There," Charis shouted, pointing at a climbable tree. "It won't keep us alive forever, but it will buy us some time."

I followed her to it and we scrambled up, finding a resting spot in a branch thirty or forty feet off the ground. A minute later the wolves arrived, barking and growling, claws scraping against the trunk of the tree, six in all.

"The power," I said. My breathing was heavy from the run and climb. I closed my eyes and focused, trying to find that river of energy I had grown to depend on. It wasn't there.

"It isn't in Purgatory," Charis said. "It's here. It has to be. It's all around us."

I looked up, trying to find the sky behind the trees. Was there a sky here, inside the Box? Or was it all a trick, a lie? I kept my eyes focused on it, refusing to blink though they became dry and scratchy. Was it like those posters that seemed to be just a pattern of color, but turned out to be the Statue of Liberty, or a sailboat? Was the power out there?

"Oh, Lannnnndddoooonnnn!" His voice echoed loudly, and he appeared at the base of the tree.

I didn't look down at him, but I knew he was there. I kept my eyes on the sky.

"Hellllloooo?" He put a hand to the tree, and it began to shake. It

took immense effort, but I didn't let it break my concentration. I could see a spot of blue through the canopy, and as I stared, it began to fade away, turning towards a dark purple.

"I've almost got it," I whispered, hoping Charis would hear me, and the Beast wouldn't.

"Hey, kid! What gives?" He kicked the tree, shaking it wildly.

I grabbed onto the branch I was sitting on for balance, but I didn't shift my eyes. They burned and teared, but I refused to break again.

"I'm going down," Charis said. "I'll see you soon."

We both knew he was going to kill us again. The only question was how much we would remember. The further we got, the better we might do. I felt the tree shift as she jumped down.

"Hey, asshole," she said.

"You're starting to like the pain, aren't you?" he said. "Have you ever been eaten alive before?"

The wolves snarled, and a moment later she was screaming, I could hear teeth smacking against bone.

"Landon, you really need to see this."

I felt his power, beckoning me to look. The sky had turned a deep hue of blue and red, and I could make out lines of power dancing along it. I focused there, like casting out a fishing line. I hooked one of the lines, and pulled.

I didn't look at him. I didn't have to. I brought my own power to bear, pressing it against his, and refusing him. Only then did I look down.

His smile was gone.

Charis was dead, her body a meal. It fueled my anger. I jumped down, landing lightly on my feet in front of him.

"That was faster than I expected," he said. He might not have been smiling, but he still didn't seem impressed. "Since you think you've got some balls now, let's see what you can do."

He stood there, hands at his sides. He eyed me calmly, waiting.

I felt the anger building, and his power with it. I felt it pouring into me, filling every cell of whatever I was in this place. I gathered it in, bringing it all to my hands. I held them out in front of me, and a ball of blue lightning began forming there, a bright ball of energy. His energy.

Ross waited, watching me with curiosity, but not fear. If I hadn't been so angry, I might have known better. If my heart hadn't been

in control, I might not have made the mistake of throwing the lightning at him.

It launched forward, a solid stream of blue energy, arcing at him in a wide, round beam. It smacked into him, and vanished.

The laughter returned, deep and rich. He shooed a wolf away from Charis' head and lifted it up, showing it off to me. "It's still my power, kid. You can't hurt me with it."

He threw it at me. As it approached, the eyes and mouth opened, and a scream came out. I closed my eyes then, knowing it was over. The head exploded an inch away, converted to the lightning ball.

It washed over me.

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8

I woke up around noon the next day with a terrible stomach ache. It was a new experience for me, to go through the weakness of human digestion, and I didn't enjoy it. I kneeled over the toilet, waiting for a sign that the burger and fries would be rejected, but in the end I was stuck with the discomfort.

It took almost ten minutes for me to shed all of Elyse's charms in order to shower. If I was going to get close to Sarah, I couldn't go in smelling like blood and fast-food. I washed the smells out, enjoying the feel of hands through long hair, and the sensation of the warm water on the body. I checked her over for cuts and bruises, finding only a small bit of discoloration on the wrist the were had grabbed. I shook my head, still not accustomed to the frailty of mortal flesh, and then shut off the water. Once I was dry, I let Elyse take over. I had taken the trinkets off, but I didn't know how to put them all back on in the right places.

"Nice work with that were," she said, once her voice was returned. She was fast putting her stuff back on. I assumed that was why she started talking. She wasn't ready to be an observer again

quite yet.

"*He was as agile as a rock* ," I said. The were really had been no match for anyone with skill. "*You would have handled him just as easily.* "

"Maybe. I think the more important question is - what was he doing in a McDonald's looking for a toy? It's brazen, even for a were."

The thought had crossed my mind last night, before I had fallen asleep. What had he been thinking, stepping out into public like that? Weres could avoid humans all day, but attract too much attention and the angels would come looking for you. Attacking a mortal in a restaurant was the definition of attracting attention, and unless you were Great an angel versus a single were was always a win for the angel. Always.

"*Something's happened to the angels* ," I said. "*At least around here.* "

"That was my thought."

"*Okay, but what?* "

She wandered out into the bedroom and pulled a fresh pair of undies from the backpack. She slipped them on and then put yesterday's outfit on top. Traveling light meant wearing dirty clothes.

"The changelings?"

"*Can't be. You saw the vampire back in Japan. He wouldn't hold his piss against a seraph.* "

"True. Hey, do you mind if I drive for awhile. It's a little boring, being-"

I shut her up by taking control. We weren't friends, we were business partners, and I wasn't interested in any efforts to change that.

There were police cars outside the McDonald's when I left, and they were talking to the cashier from the night before. I started towards the Porsche, until I saw they had recognized the stolen car too. An officer was standing next to it, on his radio while another man prepped it for towing. I cursed under my breath and headed back the other way. The parking attendant was sure to have described my appearance to them, because I hadn't thought to glamour myself.

Out of view, I pressed the glove to my cheek and pictured a different face taking the place of Elyse's. Then I went one step

further and put myself in uniform, peeking around the corner to make sure I got the details right.

There was no way to be sure it had worked, so I took a deep breath and stepped out from my hiding spot, trying to make it look like I had walked around from the other side of the building. In this form, the police made me more nervous than any were could. The Divine didn't care that much about bullets. I wished I could have said the same.

"What's the situation?" I asked, approaching the officer by the Porsche.

He looked at me, his head traveling up and down. "Are you one of the new recruits? I don't think I've seen you on this beat before?"

I smiled and nodded. "Officer Smith," I said. "I just got switched to days."

He rubbed his chin with his hand. "I'm surprised they let that go through. There's been a lot of crazy crap happening lately. Like that asshole that tried to rob the Mickey Dee's over there. He must have been on something, messing up the place and then taking off. I think he had an accomplice who stole this car from the airport too, but then they just leave it here? And then there was the guy who was eating there. He says some ninja chick was fighting with a werewolf, and that's how everything got trashed. We checked him for drugs, but he came up clean."

"Wow," I said. "That is crazy."

He laughed. "So, why did they send you over here? I think we've got everything under control."

I hesitated, but not long enough to make him suspicious. "They didn't send me. I was just on routine patrol, and I saw the action."

"Heh, yeah, I used to do that a lot when I was young. A few years, you'll realize that you're better off not knowing as often as you can get away with it."

I laughed along with him, and laid eyes on his squad car, trying to judge how far I could get before the other cops noticed. There was only one way out of this.

I let go of Elyse, feeling myself becoming immaterial again. With a final lucent thought, I aimed myself at the officer and pushed. We were so close, I was in him before he could take another breath. I clamped down on his soul, and shuddered as his memories flew through me. It was the emotions that always caused the most pain, and this guy had some pretty nasty ones. It gave me new respect

and understanding for his earlier statement.

"Rebecca?" Elyse asked, looking at me. I knew she could See me through her Eye.

"Hey buddy," I said to the tow truck driver. He stood up to look at me. "You good?"

He gave me a thumbs up. "Yessir."

"Then I'm gonna take off. It's almost the end of my shift." I started walking towards the policeman's car, Elyse trailing behind. We got in and I drove us out of there, through the back so the other officers wouldn't see.

"That was fantastic," she said while we exited the parking lot and made our way back to the Long Island Expressway.

"It was necessary," I replied. My voice was thick and deep. "I didn't want them all chasing after us." I looked over at her. "When I let him go, you let him go. Got it?" I didn't want her killing a policeman. Talk about trouble.

"But-"

I slammed on the brakes, stopping the car in the middle of the road. Tires squealed behind us, but nobody raised a fuss. "The guy in the parking garage knows what you look like. You kill a cop, and we'll never get off this island."

She held up the hand with the glove, and waved at me. "Do you want to bet? This is war, Rebecca, and there's no room for compassion."

"How can you be such a hypocrite?" I asked. "You're as dirty as he is, if not more. You let me in on purpose. He has no choice."

She started to say something and then stopped, shrinking back into the seat. I accelerated gently, satisfied that I had won that round.

We were in Montauk three hours later. I'd lived in New York for all of my vampiric life, before going to Hell. The only two things I knew about the place was that there was a lighthouse at the end of it, and a lot of wealthy people lived nearby. I had been there once when I had been little. Merov had brought me to a large mansion on the oceanfront to meet with a lesser fiend. I didn't know what kind of business they had done that day, but we'd never gone back. I don't think Merov liked the sand that much.

We drove slowly down Main Street, watching the people walking past the rows of quaint shops and restaurants, as though Sarah was going to just appear out of thin air, maybe doing some

antiquing or finishing up at one of the diners. I didn't see her, and I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Everyone here was human, as far as I could tell.

"No idea where she's staying?" I asked.

"You heard Joe. The triangulation wasn't precise. She has to be in the area. The fact that there aren't any other Divine around only convinces me more."

"You think they're staying away?"

She nodded. "I wouldn't get too close to her, if I was Divine."

We pulled over into an empty spot on the side of the road. "It's time to ditch the car," I said. "I can put him to sleep for a little while. Plenty of time for us to disappear."

"Yeah, you're probably right." She closed her eyes and waited.

I sent a message to the officer that he was really tired, and needed to sleep for a while, and then I let him go. I floated away, back to Elyse. This time when we joined, it didn't hurt at all.

I left him sleeping there and started walking along the main strip, peering into the windows of the shops just in case Sarah was in one of them. She wasn't, but I hadn't expected it to be that easy.

"Where are you, Sarah?" I whispered under my breath. It had been two months. If the Divine were staying away right now, they wouldn't be forever. Maybe that was why she had reached out to Ulnyx?

I walked east along the strip once, not wanting to double back because I didn't want the officer to find me. He would wake up with a headache and no memory of what had happened to him, and probably just drive himself back home to deal with the consequences of vanishing like that. It was better than the Korean man had gotten.

Finding nothing in town, I headed south until I reached the beach. Seeing the pale sand brought back memories of that single trip I had made with Merov. I had never actually gone out onto it, because water and vampires didn't mix very well. That didn't matter now, and I walked forward, leather boots sinking into the sand. I bent down and picked some up, letting it slip through my fingers and feeling a sense of amazement at the stuff. For all of our strength, there were some places the humans did have us beat.

I continued east along the ocean, finding an almost instinctive enjoyment in the sound of the water crashing onto the sand. It was too cool for swimmers, but a lot of others were just walking, finding

the same base comfort in the majesty of it.

I should have known He would bring me to Sarah, as soon as I forgot that I was looking for her.

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She was standing on the beach, staring out at the ocean. She looked different from the last time I had seen her - older, heavier, more filled out. She was wearing a tight black turtleneck sweater and a pair of jeans, sunglasses over her empty eyes, her feet bare in the sand. She had cut her hair short, into a simple bob that really brought out the planes of her face.

I saw her head flick over towards me for just an instant, but she dismissed me as anything but another passer-by. Right now, I was. I kept my eyes forward, looking at her from the edge of my peripheral vision. The last thing I needed was for her to suspect me of anything.

She didn't move, or turn to watch me once I had gone by. She was looking out at the ocean, just another human contemplating their position in the universe, except her position was of more importance than any of theirs. I walked another fifty feet or so along the sand and then turned and sat cross-legged, keeping my own vision on the water and waves. I couldn't see her from here unless I brought my eyes all the way to the edge of the socket, but

that meant I could get a glance over from time to time.

I'd have to keep track of where she went, and follow behind. There was no way she had the Box on her, since her clothes were too fitted to disguise its size and shape.

The wind was cool on my face, and it raised so many emotions in me. Sorrow, regret, loneliness, anger. Regret was foremost. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty, but I never should have betrayed Landon in the first place. Looking back on it, I felt like I was someone else, trying to understand a person that I couldn't recognize. I only realized I was crying when I felt the sting of the air on the tears, and had to blink them away.

"Are you okay?"

I was surprised to have had someone sneak up on me. I had to resist the urge to reach for a weapon, and instead just slowly turned my head. Sarah was kneeling down next to me.

"Uh. Yeah. I'm okay." The words were quiet and forced. I felt my heart race. I was terrified.

"Do you mind some company?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "You want to sit with me?"

She shrugged. "You look like you could use it."

I didn't know what to do. If I turned her down, she might leave and I would have trouble following without raising suspicion. If I accepted, she might figure out there was something off about me.

"Uh. Okay. Sure. My name is Elyse, but you can call me Elle." I put out my hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Elle. I'm Sarah." She sat down on the sand next to me, leaving a few inches of space between us. "What are you doing out here?"

I had to close my eyes to catch myself. I felt the power of the Command even though it couldn't compel me. Elyse had been right about her not trusting anyone.

"I just came to think. I did something I wish I hadn't and now I have to deal with the consequences."

She smiled. "I know what you mean."

Of course she did. "You do?"

"I thought I knew what I wanted, but a good friend showed me how selfish I was being." She looked out at the ocean. "But not before they got hurt because of it."

"Are you sure you aren't talking about me?"

"I've come to discover that making mistakes is pretty normal.

The difference is in how hard you try to be different, and to make up for them. It's really hard sometimes, but I wake up every day and try to do the right thing. To make the people who love me proud."

I could sense the sadness in her voice. I had expected Sarah to have suffered beneath the weight of the Box and what Landon was going through. I expected that it would have broken her. It seemed she was holding up fine. Maybe Elyse had been wrong.

"That's what I want," I said. "I'm not always sure I'm doing the right thing."

"Just do your best. That's all anybody can expect."

I nodded, staring out at the waves. Was taking the Box from her the right thing to do? What if she was trying to get Landon out, too? Had Elyse misjudged her, or was she just having a moment of lucidity that would crumble as soon as the real pressure was on?

"Do you… see things, Elle?"

The question brought me out of my head. "Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry. I know it's a weird question, it's just that… well… I have this perception, like a sixth sense about people. The ones that are different, anyway."

I could have kicked myself. Of course she would be able to tell that Elyse was Awake. That was why she had tested me.

"You're saying I'm different?"

"Are you?"

I wasn't sure what to say. "I…" I sat in silence for a moment. "I have delusions."

"Where do you live?"

It was a strange question, and she didn't Command the answer. "I don't have a home."

"Do you want one?"

She had taken in the Awake before. I decided to play along. "Of course… I mean… why wouldn't I? My family thinks I'm crazy. They don't understand… the monsters. I've seen them."

"I know you aren't crazy, Elle. I've seen them too." She lifted her head, and then turned around. "I have to go now. If you need somewhere to stay tonight, there's a small house about half a mile down. It has white shingles on it. That's where I live, but I'm going out of town for a few days."

Going out of town? I was only going to have one shot at the Box. "Why would you let me stay there? How do you know you can trust

me?"

She smiled. "Can I trust you?"

The question was a Command.

"Yes."

"There you go. That's good enough for me." She pushed herself back to her feet. "I'm meeting someone now. If you want to stay at the house, just come by after nine. I'll leave it unlocked for you."

She reached out and patted me on the shoulder, and then turned and headed up the beach. I risked a quick glance back, and then whipped my head towards the ocean.

She was meeting Ulnyx.

I closed my eyes, praying that he wouldn't recognize Elyse, or her scent. He had been part of Landon when he had seen her, but I knew weres well enough to know he wouldn't forget a face, body, or smell like hers. Were the dirty clothes and salty sea air enough to disguise me?

I held my breath and waited. When half a minute passed and I hadn't been confronted, I turned my head again. They were gone. It had been four o'clock when I had abandoned the squad car. That gave me about three hours to get into the house, find the Box, and get out of there. Depending on what her plans were, maybe less. It meant I had no time to waste.

There was no sign of them along the beach as I meandered in the direction Sarah had indicated. Every once in a while I would stop, stare at the ocean for a minute, and then continue on. Each time, I couldn't help but find myself drawn back to the same contemplative thoughts. I wanted so much to do the right thing, to do right by Landon, and to honor the grace that I had been granted.

It took me about half an hour to reach the house. It was easy enough to spot, both due to its more diminutive size, and the white shutters flanking each of the windows. Not for the first time, I wished that I could See.

Instead, I approached the house slowly, crawling up the side of a nearby sand dune that peaked about twenty feet from the foundation. I could see into one of the rooms from there, a living room with an old television, a leather couch, a coffee table and two end tables. There was also a rocking chair in the corner.

I slid back down the dune and circled to the front of the house. There was a long gravel driveway that headed out to a cross street and ended in a circle there. I didn't see any cars and it still looked

deserted, so I ran across to the other side behind an outcropping of brush.

Fairly certain that nobody was home, I walked up to the front door, keeping every cell of my eyes and ears attuned to signs of life. I had seen Sarah leave the beach with Ulnyx. I didn't know where they had gone, but I did know they would be here eventually and I didn't want to still be nearby when they returned. I guess I could have passed myself off as too stupid to know the difference between five and nine, but the last thing I wanted was to make Sarah more suspicious than she already was.

I twisted the handle on the door. Locked, as expected. Elyse had come prepared. I turned my hand so that one of the rings pressed against the handle. From the outer edge it was a simple wooden ring, made of teak and stained a deep maroon. The runes were all on the inner edge, and I felt the warmth of them against my finger while I activated the ring's power. The lock clicked. I turned the knob and entered.

I was in the living room I had seen from the window, and now I could see a set of stairs against the back wall before an archway that led into the kitchen. The was no one else here. I closed the door behind me and locked it again. I was in. Now I just needed to find the Box.

It had to be upstairs in one of the bedrooms. I ascended slowly, staying alert to anything that would signal the arrival of anyone. At the top was a tiny hallway with a bathroom over the kitchen and the two bedrooms splitting the rest of the space.

The doors to the bedrooms were open. The one on the left looked lived in: an unmade bed, some clothes on the ground, books littering the floor. The other was neatly organized, and had a musty smell to it that told me it was rarely if ever visited. Not that I had expected Sarah to be shacking up with anybody, but I had no way to know if I was the first wayward Awake she had extended herself to.

I entered Sarah's room. I didn't know how I was going to find it. I only knew that I was as sure as I could be that it was here somewhere. I went over to the closet, which was nothing more than a curtain hung over a cut-out in the room. I pushed the curtain aside and was greeted with neatly stacked piles of clothing, but no Box.

It was at that moment that I wondered how she could leave the

Box here, unguarded, and be sure that no one would try to grab it while she was out. I hadn't seen any demonic runes or angelic scripture etched into the walls or the door frame. I hadn't noticed anything that would indicate the house was defended at all.

My heart began to race. The fact that I hadn't seen anything made me suddenly sure that I had missed something. I moved the curtain back into position and closed my eyes, listening.

A minute passed. I didn't hear anything. Maybe I was overreacting, being too jumpy. I knelt on the floor and looked under the bed. It was clean. I pulled back the pillows, opened her dresser, and rifled through her underwear. She left the house unguarded because the Box wasn't here.

I knew that had to be the reason. This was going to be harder than I expected. I needed to be here, or nearby when Sarah returned. I needed to find out where the Box was. I closed Elyse's eyes, letting go of control and allowing her back in.

"*You need to get out of here* ," I said. "*I'll stay behind. They're bound to show up sooner or later. Hopefully they'll say or do something to help us find it. Come and get me when they leave.* "

I wasn't sure I could maintain myself in one place, separated from a body. I had been able to do it when Landon was nearby, but his energy was the energy I was bound to. There was no other way.

"*You need to get far enough away that Ulnyx won't smell you.* "

"I'll go for a swim. The salt and damp should disguise me well enough."

"*The water is freezing.* "

"I'll survive. If I have a shot at the Box, I'm going to take it. Be ready."

"*Okay. Good luck.* "

"You as well, Rebecca."

I focused my desire on finding Landon and then let go completely, feeling myself evaporate through her, my mind reduced to little more than a whisper. I needed to know where the Box was. I needed to stay in the house, because that was the way to find out.

Elyse could see me with the Eye. She waved at me, and then made her way out.

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We were in a house. I couldn't say where, or even when, because the house had no windows, and none of the doors led anywhere but to another part of the house, or in some cases, to a part of the house we had already seen before but couldn't connect under any string of architectural logic.

There was nothing new about it. Nothing fresh. The house was a cliche, a tired idea it seemed that Ross had caught onto somewhere and fallen in love with. He used it in unoriginal ways, sending things out of the woodwork to try to attack us, while his laughter reverberated through the rafters.

Ross. I'd stopped calling him the Beast. I'd stopped thinking of him as the Beast. It made him sound more powerful than he deserved. True, he was still destroying us with near impunity, and sure it still hurt in every way imaginable, but from the hopelessness of it had sprung a new kind of strength that I hadn't even known existed.

"No attacks for a couple of minutes," Charis said.

We had settled into a pair of high-backed, winged chairs angled

in front of a roaring fireplace. I stared into the fire, waiting for it to spring out at us, or for something to spring out from within it.

“Stay focused,” I said.

It was the realization that had brought that hidden strength into play. Our fight wasn’t against Ross. Our fight was against ourselves. Each time he killed us, we lost what had happened before, all the memory and none of the emotion. Each time we came back, we remembered a little bit more. Each time, he made sure to start the cycle again before we could put all the pieces together.

We had to stay focused to remember the parts that were important. We had to repeat them in our minds, over and over and over, until it was so committed that it became a part of the bare threads of who or what we were in this place. It had taken time to figure that much out, and in that time we had lost important information.

Other things, we brought back, some almost as soon as we re-spawned. It was funny to think of it that way, like we were trapped in a video game, but having passed through a door just to wind up on the opposite side of the same room, it felt like one.

“Our power is his power,” I said. “ We can use his power.”

“Not against him,” she replied. “It doesn’t work.”

“Not directly. What if there was another way?”

We were both silent for a minute, each of us repeating the mantra. ‘What if there was another way? What if there was another way?’

“He created this place,” Charis said. “What if we created something? Made our own monster?”

“It’s still his power that is making it. He can unmake it.”

She gave an exasperated sigh. “How does that not put us back to square one?”

I heard the creak of the door behind us swinging open, and got to my feet. “Where is our power, Charis? It can’t all be his. It just can’t. Sarah had to pour some of her energy into the Box. We’re almost the same as she is. It has to be available to us.”

I looked up at the creature that had stepped into the room. A young woman in a long white Victorian style dress. She looked back at me with cold black eyes.

“This is really unoriginal,” I shouted. I knew Ross would hear me.

“You don’t like the ruffles?” he asked, through the mouth of the

woman. “I mean, I know you tend to go for the ones in the skintight denim, but look, she has black hair.” She reached up and twirled a strand of it between her fingers.

“Just get on with it,” Charis said, stepping up next to me.

“Now, what fun would that be?” She shook her head. “First, let’s see what you can do with my little abomination here. She took me a long time to make, relatively speaking.” The eyes flashed from black to white, and then she attacked.

She went right for Charis, moving so fast it was more like she flashed from one spot to another. Her hand snapped forward and caught her under the chin. The force broke her jaw and threw her back against the wall over the fireplace. She bounced off and landed face down.

I set myself while the abomination turned my direction. She had a twisted smile on her face, so similar to his.

“Come on,” I said.

She hissed, one moment six feet away, the next right in my face. I tried to punch her, but she blinked to the side, and then raked my cheek with eight-inch claws. I could hear them sliding along the bone, and I felt the warmth of my blood spilling out of the wound.

Not that she could kill me. Maybe I should have let her finish the job so we could reset again, but there was something in me that told me it would be a mistake to give up. To ever give up. I stumbled from the blow, but I straightened up to face her.

“You can do better than that.”

She smiled again, and her teeth grew out into fangs. Blink! She was back in my face, her teeth coming down on my neck.

It hurt. A lot. I cried out, planting my arms against her, trying to shove her away. I couldn’t get any kind of grip on her through all of the fabric, which was fast becoming soaked in my blood.

“Hey Virginia,” Charis said. I found her back on her feet, a steel poker in her hand.

The creature turned towards her at the same time the poker was angling in at her head. Blink! She was on the other side of the room, out of the path of the weapon. Blink! She grabbed Charis by the throat, and threw her across the room. Blink! The abomination followed, flashing from one spot to the other, bending down and raking her across the chest.

I focused, finding the Beast’s power and pulling it in. The poker rose from the ground and shot towards the creature like a bullet.

Blink! She vanished before it hit her, appearing in front of me again, smashing me in the gut with sharp fingers. I felt them tear through my stomach and into my intestines, threatening to pull them out.

“Daddy!”

The door to the room swung open, and Clara stepped in.

She was wearing a blue and pink dress, her brown hair pulled back into pig tails, her face angry and afraid.

“Clara?” Charis said. Clara wasn’t real. We didn’t have a daughter.

“Let my daddy go,” she said.

She was walking towards me, her eyes sparkling in a swirling mixture of light and fire. The abomination held my insides in her hand, but she turned her head towards the girl.

“What is this?” Ross asked. “I made you.”

“Shhh!” Clara put her finger up to her lips. “It’s a secret.”

“What are you talking ab…“

Clara raised her hand, and the abomination vanished, Ross with it. I felt wetness at my stomach, the blood running freely now that the claw wasn’t plugging the hole.

“Fix it,” Clara said, looking at the wound.

“What?”

“Fix it.”

She came to me and put her small hand in mine. I felt something then. Not the touch of a child, but the touch of something else. I focused, taking in the Beast’s power, and mixing it with the thread of energy I felt running through her palm. The hole in my stomach vanished.

“Clara?” Charis was back on her feet, coming over to us. Her chest was just as torn as mine.

“Fix it,” Clara said. She held out her other hand.

Charis took it, and her eyes changed the way I imagine mine had. A moment later her wounds were gone. She looked at me. “Landon?”

I smiled. “The connection,” I said. “Our power is here.”

In a child. A little girl. She was our daughter, but she wasn’t our daughter. It was a complicated metaphor, courtesy of the Box. She had been there all along, through so many of the cycles of pain and torture Ross had forced us to endure. He had destroyed her so many times, dissipated the power before it could consolidate and before

we could recognize it for what it was. He hadn't made her. He couldn't make anything.

"Come with me," she said. She started tugging both of us towards the door.

"Do you think it will be that easy?"

The abomination appeared in front of us, blocking the path. It had changed. The hair was gone. The dress was gone. It was a humanoid shape devoid of feature or detail. Claws, small eyes, sharp teeth, a head, two arms, two legs, and a torso. That was it.

"Go," Clara said, gesturing at it.

Ross laughed.

I yanked on our power, bringing it into me, and then let go of Clara's hand. I leaped forward at the creature, my own hand elongating into a set of claws. Blink! It tried to escape, but I reached out to it and held it with Divine power. I brought the claws up and around, severing its head.

"Easier then before," I said.

The room started shaking.

"This way," Clara cried.

She started tugging Charis towards a new door, one that hadn't existed a minute ago. Her little legs were too slow, so Charis scooped her up as we ran.

I looked back over my shoulder, at Ross making an appearance of his own. He had his watch in hand, and he'd lifted his sunglasses aside to look at it.

"Not bad, kid. You might make a sport of this yet."

He motioned with his hand and the doorway became a wall. Charis staggered to a stop.

Fifty weres burst through the double doors, charging into the room. They parted around Ross, and a stream of them headed for Charis.

"No," she said. She kicked one in the head, sending it backwards and knocking over two more. She spun and punched another with a free hand, then leapt over a fourth. One of the weres tried to intercept her in mid-air, and she let go of Clara just long enough to smash it aside before catching her again.

Ross watched, and then shrugged. "I guess I need a few more."

"You'll need an army," I said. I found the poker, still laying on the floor. I focused, superheating it, melting into hundreds of white-hot balls of iron. I swept them around the room, pelting the weres,

burning through their hearts. I didn't know if they would heal or not. They didn't.

Ross looked around at the dead mess. "Fine. I'll do it myself."

He pulled a gun from a shoulder holster tucked under his suit jacket, and shot Clara in the head.

My heart jumped as her head slumped into Charis' shoulder. She wasn't our child. She wasn't a child at all, not in truth. It didn't make the act any less disgusting. "Clara!" I ran towards them, Ross forgotten.

"Too far," Charis whispered. She reached up and stroked the little girl's hair. "Landon, we have to remember."

I reached them in time to put my hand on top of hers, so that both of us were caressing her head. "You're right." I swallowed every emotion, and pushed a single thought towards my soul, one that I hoped would carry over to the next regeneration.

"Clara." I whispered.

The gun fired two more times.

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11

I had no concept of time in my ghostly form. I had no concept of much of anything. The only thought that kept repeating was to find out where the Box was, where Landon was, so that I could set him free. The only emotion I felt was eagerness.

Sarah showed up with Ulnyx at some point. She went to get him a beer while he spread his massive bulk out on the sofa.

"He never got back to you?" the Were asked.

"No," Sarah said. "I tried calling, e-mail, text message. I even posted to that damn internet channel he likes so much." She came back in and handed him the bottle.

Ulnyx huffed. "I never thought Obi would take himself out of the game while Landon was still twisting in the wind. Hell, I'm still in." He used his teeth to break off the end of the longneck, and swallowed the drink in a few large gulps.

"You aren't the one who…" She didn't finish the sentence.

Ulnyx did. "Lost their girlfriend? He needs to man up and grow a pair. We've all lost something or someone. We'd have lost even more if Landon hadn't sacrificed himself."

“You can shift into a monster. Obi has what? The smallest slice of power making him a little tougher? He’s more human than human, but he’s still human. Help me roll this back.”

I watched Ulnyx get up and lift the coffee table, pulling it off the rug. Then he helped Sarah roll it up to the couch, just enough to reveal a small metal handle attached to a block of stone, covered with a thousand sigils and marks. Sarah grabbed the handle and lifted the stone away from the floor. All of the sides were enclosed except one. That was why I couldn’t find it, and why no angel or demon would have found it either. It wasn’t just hidden from sight, but also from Sight.

Avriel’s Box. It was a mottled black, with blue lines of energy coursing along the Templar script on the outside, pulsing and pounding in a strange rhythm. Landon was in there. So was the Beast. I had let Avriel and Abaddon out of the Box. I knew what had occurred in there. If I had a form, I would have shuddered.

“It keeps me awake at night sometimes,” Sarah said. “I can’t stop thinking about the fact that Landon and Charis are in there with him. I wonder what he’s doing to them. How it feels.”

She’d seemed so strong when she talked to me on the beach, but now I could hear the cracks when she started talking. Underneath that exterior was a soul struggling to stay sane in a time that was beyond crazy.

“How do you know they aren’t kicking his ass?” Ulnyx asked. “Why does it have to be the Beast that’s winning?”

“Sometimes, they may be.” She kicked the rug, rolling it back out, and then sat down on the couch. Ulnyx regained his position there. “The Box is a universe inside of itself. It has its own rules, and its own laws, but there is one that must be maintained. It was Avriel’s mistake, and Alichino’s mistake. They thought it was just about the power, the energy. I only realized while I lay there staring at the ceiling. They had missed the most important piece.”

I felt the answer, as much as I heard it.

Balance.

“Even the Box demands balance. Avriel balanced Abaddon. Landon and Charis balance the Beast.”

“What does it mean if they’re balanced in there?” the Were asked.

“It means that they can never lose,” a new voice said. Dante. “It means they can never win either.”

He appeared between them on the couch. He was wearing a simple navy blue suit with a red tie, his hair slicked back. He looked old, but energized.

“That isn’t completely true,” Sarah said.

Dante shrugged. “We’ve discussed this, dear. I even went to Alichino with the idea, and he ran some computer models. The odds are astronomical.”

“What are you talking about, old man?” Ulnyx asked.

“Don’t get your fur all bunched, signore. I assume since you were inside Landon for a time you have a solid understanding of the balance?”

A short growl served as the Were’s response.

“Yes, well, just as the balance can be tipped here, it can be tipped there. The trouble is, it is much easier to do here, and the effects are much easier to understand. If you think of it in terms of a mathematical equation, the-“

“Forget it,” Ulnyx said. “Get to the point.”

“There’s a one in a million probability that Landon and Charis can sufficiently overpower the Beast to break the balance. After which, there is a one in a million probability that doing so won’t destroy this realm, and perhaps all of them.”

“You can’t know that,” Sarah said.

Dante glared at her. “No, and neither can you. Nobody knows what would happen if the balance was lost inside the Box.”

“The Beast could bust it too,” Ulnyx said.

“Yes, which is why I asked you two to meet me here.” He paused and looked around the room. “Where is Obi-wan?”

Sarah sighed. “He wouldn’t come.”

Dante didn’t look happy. He stared at the ground and rubbed his chin with a frail hand. “There is strength in numbers, but if we must, we must.”

“Must what?”

“As you are aware, I can’t stay here for long, which means my usefulness is limited. We need to get the Box to Switzerland, to the CERN laboratory. Alichino will meet us there, and together we will destroy it.”

What? Every particle of my being cried out, my whole existence feeling the threat of his words. How could he?

“Dante, no,” Sarah said. “You’re going to kill Landon.”

The Outcast didn’t seem fazed by the idea. Had my form been

capable, I would have killed him.

"I'm sorry, signora. Was that not what Landon asked of us before we lost him?"

"Sarah told me to come here to help you get Landon out," Ulnyx said. "Not to finish burying him."

"He deserves for us to try," Sarah said.

"At what cost?" Dante replied, his voice rising. "We already know that your father is plotting to use the Box to gain the Beast's power for himself. Do we wait for Gervais to send Izak to come and take it from us? Or do we wait for Lucifer or the seraph to throw an army at us so that they can take control? There are only three of us, and I cannot even stay here long to help you. How do you propose we keep the Box away from everyone who knows anything about the Divine indefinitely? It's going to be risky enough trying to get it to Switzerland. I have given you two months to find an answer, and you have none."

None? How could there be no hope? I didn't believe it. Where was Elyse? She needed to make a try for the Box, before he could convince Sarah to help him.

"I've lost everything else," Sarah said, her meek reply little more than a whisper.

Dante's face softened. "I know, signora, but I promised Landon I would find a way to destroy the Box for all time. The longer we leave it in this world, the more the risk it poses to all of everything. I'm sorry, but Landon would want the Box out of reach of everyone who would want to use it for their own aims. We must destroy it."

I could feel the pain of the words, even in my ghostly state. There was little chance that Elyse could get the Box away from Sarah, Ulnyx, and Dante. She couldn't even stand up to Sarah without being under my control. Landon was as good as dead unless I did something, but I was powerless. I had so little self, so little substance, but I had enough to pray. Please, help him.

There was a knock at the door.

"Expecting someone?" Dante asked.

Ulnyx raised his nose. "Whoever it is, they smell like sweat and seawater."

Sarah turned to the door. "It's okay. I'll take care of this."

That was when I knew it was Elyse. It took every bit of effort I could manage, but I propelled myself towards the door. If Sarah tried to Command her again, she wouldn't stand a chance.

Sarah put the Box down on the coffee table and headed in the same direction. She walked right through me, leaving me with a strange feeling of lightness that I hadn't expected. I fought to keep myself from becoming disoriented. Landon needed me to reach Elyse. We needed to take the Box before they could destroy it.

She reached the door and put her hand on the knob. I was a few feet behind, struggling to keep up. As soon as she started turning, the door slammed open, the force of it smashing into her arm and sending her flailing backwards. Elyse stood there, knife in hand. Her head was bare, and the Eye glowed at my presence.

"Hurry," she said, running towards me.

"Elyse?" Sarah was stunned, but recovering. "St-"

I was inside of her, my vaporous soul clamping down on hers and taking the wheel. She stumbled once while she ran, the transfer completing, but I regained my balance and shoved Sarah aside before she could react.

"I'm sorry, Sarah. I won't let you kill him."

Three more strides, and I was in the living room with Dante and the Were. It was too small in here for Ulnyx to shift completely, but his hands grew out into large claws. I stuck my free hand in the pocket of the leather jacket, finding a small brick there. I broke it and threw it at him.

The dust spread across his face, and he cursed and howled while his body shifted back to human form and he began to choke. The Box was sitting there, beckoning to me, only a few feet away.

"Stop." Dante moved in front of me, holding his hand out.

I knew he expected something to happen, but he had no more power over me than Sarah did. I didn't stop. I jabbed the knife into his gut and shoved him out of the way, knowing he could flee to heal. I reached down and took the Box, careful to keep it in its protective enclosure. In front of me, I could see the back door that led out to the beach. That was my escape route.

"No." I felt Sarah's power wash over me, harmless.

"You can't Command me," I said. "I'm going to find a way to save him. I have to." I jumped over the couch and sprinted to the back door. I had opened it halfway when the first bullets started raining in.

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I stopped moving forward and dove to the ground behind the kitchen counter. I couldn't hear anything but the sound of rapid gunfire, the shattering of glass, and the thuds and clinks of bullets hitting different surfaces. I didn't need special powers to know what was going on. The Nicht Creidim had followed me, or Sarah. They had seen me take the Box, and now they were making their move.

I stayed low, waiting for the initial round to wear out. I hadn't heard Sarah scream, so I could only assume she'd avoided getting hit.

The pace slowed when magazines were emptied, and almost in unison the attackers had to stop to reload. I pushed myself to my feet, staying crouched so I wouldn't be visible in the window, and started slinking back towards the door. I had only taken two steps when a huge claw landed on my shoulder.

"Going somewhere?" Ulnyx asked. The dust I had thrown at him had worn off.

"They're going to kill us all," I said. "We have about three seconds while they reload, and you may be tough, but a hundred

silver bullets will leave you paralyzed on the floor."

I felt his breath hot on my neck, and then the weight of his claw vanished and he shot past me out the door. A few seconds later I heard the first scream.

I could have left him then, made my escape and let them deal with the Nicht Creidim. I could have, but I didn't. Something in me told me not to, that Landon wouldn't abandon him to die. Instead, I followed him out the door. It was dark, with the only light coming from the house, but I could see the blurry form of a man face down near the water and the dark mass of the Were headed for his next victim.

I dropped down when the bullets started coming again, and I heard the Were roar. I knew he was being peppered by silver, but based on the screams he was getting even for it. I stayed low and ran along the side of the house behind him.

It was the second roar that scared me. The one that I heard when I neared the front of the house. Three mangled bodies had already slid down the side of the sand dune where I had perched earlier, their throats ripped away. Ulnyx had been making short work of them to that point.

The dagger, I knew. Elyse called it Wolfsbane, and she had wanted to bring it with us, but it had already been out. Now I knew why. I took a deep breath and rushed towards the source of the Were's complaint, daring the bullets to find me and praying that they didn't. I could hear them whistling past my ears, still targeting the house even though I was coming towards them. Were they so preoccupied with their target that they hadn't noticed me?

I didn't see the butt of the assault rifle until it had slammed into the side of my head, sending me sprawling and threatening to rip me from Elyse. It was a blow that would have knocked anyone else unconscious, and I was sure that had been the plan. From my position on the ground, I could see the Were on his knees in human form, blood running from a dozen wounds. He glared at me, his face twisted in anger.

The gunfire started again, aimed at the house. I realized they were happy to kill Sarah, but just as happy to keep her pinned down, their attack loud enough to prevent her voice from reaching them. A pair of black boots stopped just in front of my head.

"Elyse. Joe told me if I wanted the Box, all I had to do was follow you. You've always been the best retriever." I recognized the

voice through her. Cousin Ken. He bent down and pulled the Box from my outstretched hand. “Thanks for retrieving it for me.”

I lifted my head so I could see him. Long, thick black hair, a handsome face, big muscles. An amazing martial artist, and a talented musician. That was what Elyse’s memories told me. I smiled. “Did you think it would be that easy?”

He laughed. “The Were is contained, the bitch is pinned down, and you’ve got a concussion. I think everything has gone perfectly.”

Not everything. I released Elyse and shoved myself forward. We were so close, the trip only took a few seconds, seconds that he wasted waiting on my reply.

I took him then, screaming inwardly at the pain of his memories. His childhood, the abuse he had suffered under his father and had to endure because of their family’s code. The anger and pain he teased out in motion and song and violence. His secret lust for Joe’s favorite daughter.

It flowed through me, and then he was mine.

Elyse laid there, groggy, her own consciousness not as able to deal with the blow she had taken. She stared up at me. “Rebecca?”

I nodded and put the Box back on the ground. I had the assault rifle in my other hand, and I brought it up to my shoulder. Divine didn’t have much need for firearms, but that didn’t mean I’d never trained to use them.

Three shots, and each of the Nicht Creidim closest to Ulnyx fell to the sand. I dropped the gun and walked over to the Were. My motions were shaky while I fought to get the balance of the new body right, but I made it across the sand and pulled the Wolfsbane from his stomach. He cursed at the pain, and then it all began to heal. I was sure he didn’t know why they hadn’t just killed him, but I did. There was a market for pieces of Lucifer’s dark creations, and the Nicht Creidim had no problem cutting those pieces out. After all, they would grow back anyway.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked. “Or maybe, what the hell are you?”

“There are six more of them, Were. Do you want to help Sarah, or do you want to chat about my lineage?”

He got to his feet, shifting once more.

“Maybe I should just rip your head off.”

I held up the knife. “They only have one of these. I can use it on you, or you can go take care of the rest of the assault team.”

He laughed. “Whoever you are, I like your style. I’ll be back for you in a minute.” He bounded off towards the other side of the house.

I didn’t plan on being there when he came back. I returned to Elyse, who had only managed to get into a sitting position. “We need to get out of here.”

There was a set of keys in my pocket, and I knew from Ken’s memories which dune he had left the car behind.

She nodded, but she was groggy and slow. I swapped the Wolfsbane for the hidden jacket knife, using the plain steel to stab myself in the heart before I abandoned my host and retook Elyse.

I could feel the throbbing in my head, but I ignored it and got to my feet. I took the Box and the keys from Ken while he knelt on the ground dying.

“I told you it wouldn’t be that easy.”

He looked up at me with tears in his eyes, and I stumbled forward in a moment of panic and remorse. It wasn’t that I had killed him, but I had done so with no emotion, and no hesitation. It was an action I was sure He wouldn’t have approved of.

“I’m sorry,” I said. Then I started running over the sand towards the waiting vehicle. A few seconds later I heard the gunfire stop, as Ulnyx caught up to the last of them. He would be back for me, but he wouldn’t know which way I went. I crested a larger dune and slid down the side, right to the door of a Nissan Leaf. It seemed like a ridiculous car to launch an assault in, but the electric engine kept it stealthy. I opened the door, jumped in, and started it up.

I could see the Were bounding towards me in the rearview as I drove away. He gained at first, but I pegged the pedal to the floor and watched him fade.

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“Well, I guess we’ve come full circle,” I said. We were standing on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. Manhattan spread out below us, glass windows and steel reflecting the sunlight from above.

“Maybe he ran out of fresh ideas?” Charis asked.

How many times had we died now? How many times had we watched Clara be killed? Since we had uncovered her secret, she had returned over and over again, bringing our power with her, and trying to help us escape from Ross.

“I don’t see Clara,” I said, spinning around. The deck was empty except for us.

“We’re getting better at this, Landon, but this can’t be all there is. We’re still losing.”

“I know.” I leaned in and kissed her forehead. “We’re getting stronger. Did you see his face the last time, when Clara bit him? He didn’t expect us to get this far.”

“We have eternity.”

“Not if I can help it.”

I'd been committing a lot of those thoughts to memory, too. In the beginning, it had seemed the only hope for us lay in Sarah and Dante to find a way to destroy the Box, and us with it. But without any way to understand the passage of time out of this place, I was more resigned than ever to be locked in this eternal spawn, die, repeat. It helped that we were slowly getting stronger, and living longer between resets, but the emotional scars remained. The torment, the anguish. It didn't fade. It never faded.

Still, there had been signs that we might not need outside help to overcome him. The fact that we were remembering more and more, and faster. The fact that Clara was getting stronger with each regeneration. Charis' realization that the Box would never have held him long without us. The balance, she said, and I knew it was true. I wasted a whole cycle of this charade railing about how Malize screwed us, because he knew what would have to be done and didn't say so. Complaining about it was a waste now, but if I ever got some more face time with him, I would be sure to speak with my fist.

"The balance can be tipped," I said. "The same as it can in the real world. We can overcome it, and destroy Ross here."

"Except we don't know what the consequences will be, or if they can reach beyond this prison."

"As in destroy the whole world?"

"Yes. Or worse."

Like, destroy everything. That was the fear, but there was a wrench in that consideration. "Do you think he's going to hesitate to tip things his way if he has the chance? That's what he wants after all. The results will be the same."

Charis smiled. "Better us than him, right?"

I returned her grin. "As far as I'm concerned it is. Maybe if we break him, break this place, we can get out?"

The elevator announced its arrival, and we turned to see who would be joining us. The doors slid aside. Clara.

"It took you long enough," I said to her.

She rolled her eyes at me and stepped out onto the floor. Before, she was a child of four or five. Now she was at least nine.

"That's your fault, daddy," she replied.

"Where is he?"

She looked back toward the elevator, and then ran to the windows. "Not in here. Not out there. I've hidden us from his eyes."

“You can do that?” Charis asked.

She giggled. “No, of course not. You can.”

That was a new development. It wasn’t like Clara was a conscious thing for us. She was our connection, which was only getting stronger the longer we were trapped in here. My opinion was that she grew at the same rate as our trust, understanding, and love. That she seemed to be able to sense Ross… I wasn’t sure what that meant yet.

“Don’t be so surprised,” Clara said. “These are the things that he knows nothing about. Things he doesn’t understand.” She was part of me, of course she knew my mind. “He’s stronger than you. His power is ninety percent of what’s in here. Still, what you share is lost to him. Even one percent of that can hold its own against one hundred percent destruction.”

Lost to him? Was she suggesting…

“No time, daddy,” Clara said. She took my hand, and then Charis’. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?” Charis asked.

“Away. We’re hiding right now, but we can’t stay. He’ll find us if we stand still.”

“I don’t want to run from him,” I said.

She sighed like I was the dumbest person in the world. “We aren’t running from him, daddy. We’re leading him.”

Leading him? “Where?”

“Circles,” she replied.

Charis laughed. “The longer we survive, the stronger we get. We just need to evade him until we’re too powerful for him to stop.”

“You get a cookie,” Clara said.

“Okay, so how do we keep moving? Where do we go?”

Clara smiled, the way only a precocious nine year old could. “Memories, mommy.”

“What memories?”

“Yours.”

The elevator doors dinged, and Clara twisted her head to look at them. “He’s fast.” She grabbed our hands, and pulled us towards the glass windows.

I pulled back. “Clara? There’s nowhere to go.”

The doors opened. I was expecting Ross. I got Abaddon.

“Diuscrucis,” he said in his cold voice. Black tendrils of despair crept out away from him, slipping along the floor and ceiling

towards us.

I felt the fear. I could tell Charis did too. “This can’t be real,” I said. Abaddon had fled to Hell.

I couldn’t see his body through the cloak of black power. The center of him was a swirling mass of impenetrable emptiness.

“This can’t be real,” I repeated.

Clara pinched my hand, and I looked down at her. “Time to go,” she said. She turned back to the window, and the glass shattered outward, letting in the heavy gusts of air that owned these heights. “What are you afraid of?” she asked me. “You’ve done this before.”

Abaddon was coming closer, moving out of the elevator towards us. His darkness spread, wrapping around the rest of the windows and threatening to choke us off. “He isn’t real,” I said again. Maybe it was time to go, but I wasn’t going to run away until I proved myself right.

I found Ross’ power so much more easily now. I pulled it into me, and then squeezed Clara’s hand and took only a single thread of energy from her. I wrapped it around the energy, and threw it forward at Abaddon, pushing with my will for the glamour to be lifted.

The entire facade fell away, leaving Ross standing right in front of the elevator in his pinstriped suit and sunglasses, an old-fashioned Tommy gun pressed against his hip.

“The game’s starting to get interesting,” he said.

We couldn’t survive getting shot here. It was a good thing Charis had already made the decision to jump for me. I felt Clara’s hand give a hard tug, and I gripped it tighter in response. I could almost see the bullets go flying overhead as I tumbled backwards out of the window.

If we couldn’t survive getting shot, how were we going to survive a thousand foot fall? I kept my grip on Clara’s hand and tried not to scream. The sky rushed away from me, and a few seconds later I saw Ross stick his head out of the broken window.

“Oyster, sir?”

What? I blinked my eyes a few times, trying to get my brain back up to speed. The tower was gone, the sky was gone, Ross was gone. I was on my feet… somewhere. A tuxedoed server was holding a silver tray of oysters a little too close to my face.

“Uh… no, thank you,” I said, taking a step back The waiter was expressionless as he moved on. “Where the hell am I?” I whispered.

“Maine,” Charis said, appearing behind me. “Seventeen-seventy-five. Nice tux, by the way.”

She looked strangely gorgeous in a period proper gold hued dress with a modest hoop and lots of embroidery. Her hair was pinned up on her head, and she had an ease about the whole thing that made me a little uncomfortable. I looked down at myself, noting the black wool tuxedo coat and pants. It made me even more uncomfortable.

“General Montgomery?” I asked. I had all of her memories. I had a guess where we were.

“Yes.”

Charis would spend the night in the arms of one of Montgomery’s top officers. Two days later, the good General would lead a militia north into Canada to try to take Quebec. He would fail, in no small part to her sending advance warning to the Canadian and British troops stationed there.

“You were wearing a red dress,” I said. I looked out past her, to where uniformed officers of the American militia were kibitzing with their patrons. We were in a small mansion belonging to a local businessman. It had a nice big downstairs for entertaining, and six bedrooms upstairs, which according to my memories were also being used for entertaining. Red dress Charis was likely in one of those rooms, without her red dress.

“Don’t get jealous,” she said. “This stuff happened two centuries ago, when I was still alive.”

“I’m a little torn,” I replied. “You were aiding the enemy, after all.”

She laughed. “Your enemy, not mine.”

“Not really mine either. I wouldn’t be born for a long time after this. It’s kind of crazy to be here now.”

I looked around the room again. “Where’s Clara?”

It was as if she was just waiting for us to look for her. She stepped out from the midst of the gathering, in a frilly white dress, her hairstyle matching Charis’. She came up to us and took my hand.

I squatted down so we were at eye level. Charis joined me. “Now what?” I asked.

“He’ll try to change things, to undo what we’ve made,” she said. “It will be hard for him, because the memories bind us and give us strength. They’re more real to us than anything he can conjure up,

and true creation is hard to destroy. He doesn't really know how to make, he just fakes it. The cracks are everywhere if you know where to look."

"He found us pretty fast in New York," Charis said.

"He knows New York well. It will be harder for him to find us here."

I didn't completely understand the rules of the game of hide and seek we were playing, at least not on the surface. Clara was an extension of us, so there had to be some base part of ourselves that knew what was going on.

"So we just hang out here until he catches up?"

She nodded. "Yes, daddy. Then we have to run again, and we have to be quick. Leave too soon and he'll be able to follow right behind. There is no leaving too late."

I knew what she meant. I could still hear the cracking of the Tommy gun ringing in my ears. "How do we know if it's the right time?"

"Things will change," she said. "That's the clue. It's the right time when we see him. We have to all be together, not touching but close by. Think of a memory. Any memory to get us away, but detailed is better. It makes us harder to find."

"Okay, let's just concentrate on staying together then," I said. "What happens if he kills us?"

She rolled her eyes at me again. It was super cute, but I hated when she did that. "He didn't know you could do this. Now that he does…"

She didn't need to finish. I got it. He wouldn't let us live long enough to remember again. Maybe he wouldn't let us live at all. I could picture an endless cycle of rebirth and murder, from now until never.

"So the longer we survive the more powerful we get, right?" I asked. "The more powerful we get, the easier it will become to defeat him."

"Yes, and no. Remember the balance, daddy. Always remember the balance."

The answer gave me a chill. I leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks, Clara." She was so real sometimes.

I stood back up and looked out at the assembly of soldiers and citizens. There was nothing to do but wait for Ross to show his face. When he did, we would leave.

“Any particular memory you’d like to visit?” I asked Charis. I was trying not to think too much about this one.

She laughed. “How about the time you made out with Tammy Robinson?”

I could feel my face turning red. “I was sixteen,” I said.

“It was very cute. Your first chance to get to first base.”

She was patronizing me. “I’ve learned a lot since then.”

“You guys,” Clara said, tugging on my pants. “Let’s get something to eat.”

Charis laughed again. Could it be possible that we might actually be able to enjoy ourselves in this place, even if only for a few fleeting minutes at a time? It was nice to not have Ross right on our tails for once.

The three of us wandered through the house, drawing curious glances from the others because our kid was the only kid around. She didn’t seem to notice, using her nose to track us to a table of American classics. Pie, turkey, potatoes; it was like the original Thanksgiving. It smelled great.

“You don’t really need to eat,” I said.

She looked up at me and stuck out her tongue. “Daddy, think in metaphor.” She grabbed a loaf of bread and took a bite from the end. “I don’t want to have to spell everything out to you.” Her words were mumbled with a mouth full of food, but I heard them all the same.

“Quite a little darling,” I said to Charis.

“I think she’s perfect,” she replied, her eyes holding mine.

“I never thought of you as the motherly type.” Not that I ever thought of myself as a father either.

“Me neither, but I see you and I together when I look at her. I like that.”

Together, but not quite. Being in the Box hadn’t exactly left us any time to do anything even close to what I had shared with Tammy Robinson. Still, I knew what she meant. Watching her die so many times had been pure agony.

A murmur started to rise from the living room, and before I knew what was happening Charis… Red Dress Charis came running into the room, holding her dress wrapped around her and looking back over her shoulder. She slammed right into me, her face snapping up to look into mine, her eyes wide with fear.

“Get out of my way,” she said, looking backwards again.

“Landon, this never happened,” the real Charis said.

Ross was here already? I pushed fake Charis out to arm’s length.

“Let me go,” she demanded. Her foot whipped out into my leg. I felt the pain of my kneecap shattering beneath the force, and I fell to the ground. Fake Charis’ eyes narrowed and flared an angry red.

“Not so fast,” Charis said. She had grabbed a serving fork from the table, and she jammed it into her counterpart’s neck, and then threw her across the spread.

I couldn’t heal here, not like I had outside the Box. Charis lifted me up and put her shoulder beneath mine so I could stay off my leg.

“Excuse me, sir?” The waiter was back. Charis didn’t wait for him to do anything surprising. She slammed the flat of her hand into his nose, and he flopped backwards with a groan.

“Is it time?” she asked Clara.

She was still chewing on the bread, taking smaller bites and looking around. “Not yet.”

“Why don’t you heal your father, like you did in the house?”

“Sorry, mommy. I can’t. It isn’t safe.”

What did that mean? “Let me go,” I said. “I can manage.” She slipped out from under me, and I brought my weight down gently. It hurt, but I had a lot of experience with pain. “We need to get out of here.”

I heard the sound of a musket hammer drawing back. There was a pop, and a ball of iron whizzed by my head. I found the shooter across the room, a soldier with a wide grin.

“Really? Not yet?”

She smiled up at me. I noticed a couple of her front teeth were missing. “Okay, we can go now,” she said. “We need to get out that door.” She pointed back at it, only ten feet away.

Ten feet was nothing unless your leg was broken. He pulled the hammer back again and took aim.

The waiter’s silver platter was resting a few feet away. With a thought, I brought it up in front of us, just in time to catch the second bullet. I started limping backwards, until Charis scooped me up and tossed me over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. The entire house burst into flames around us.

“Going somewhere?” Ross asked. I felt him tug on the platter, and I countered it, showing him that I could.

“See you around,” I said. I felt Charis shift as she kicked open the burning door. A wash of frigid air flowed in around us.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, kid,” he said. He let go of the platter, ducking under it as it sped by. He crouched there while the flames engulfed him, his face framed by the fire.

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I sat on the edge of the bed in a small room at the Hilton Hotel, right outside of JFK airport. I cradled the scripted stone that held the Box on my lap, running my finger along it, tracing the lines of pulsing blue power that proved that Landon and the Beast were still in there. I tried not to think about what he might be going through, or how much pain he might be in. I tried to concentrate on what would happen next.

The Leaf was quiet, but its range was limited. Ken had left a more conventional motorcade in Amagansett, three Cadillac Escalades to transport the Nicht Creidim back to base with their prize. I took the one that Ken held the keys to. It was too bad none of them would be coming back to claim the others.

The alone time while driving had led me back to considering how easily I had killed Elyse's cousin. He had redeemed me, had He not? I was doing His will, and His work. So why did I feel like there was a part of me that was still a demon, and a monster? The thoughts almost brought me to tears, and to questions I could only resolve with faith in place of understanding. I believed in my goal. I

believed in my purpose. It had to be enough.

They would miss Ken's return, of course. They would send people out to discover what had gone wrong. They would find Elyse's knife in his chest, assuming Ulnyx and Sarah didn't hide or destroy the bodies. They'd miss the Escalade too, which is why I'd driven it to La Guardia, set it on fire, and then taken a cab to the other airport. They'd figure that out eventually, but not before I was on my way to… where?

I hadn't known, so I checked into the hotel and sat in the room there, holding the Box like it was a baby. I'd taken a little more time for myself, to be alone with it and think. To allow a minor calm before the major storm I knew was soon to come. Every party who knew anything about the Divine or the Beast wanted their hands on the Box, and now the only thing between it and them was me. And while I was almost indestructible, I was still dependent on mortals to be able to do much of anything.

One last deep breath, and I put the Box across the room, out of my own easy reach. I returned to the bed and reduced my grip on Elyse, allowing her to regain her body while I clung to her like a parasite.

"You did it," she said. She started to get up, but I clamped down on her again, and made her sit.

"*Leave it over there. We need to talk.* "

"You want to know what to do now, correct?" She sounded amused.

"*It would be helpful. I'm not convinced this isn't the part where you betray me. You don't really need me anymore.* "

"Don't sell yourself so short, Rebecca. I'm not going to betray you, and I do still need you quite a bit. You're crazy if you don't believe Sarah will catch up to us, or at least has the potential to. Besides, he's insisted that if I'm to get what I want, we can't do it without you."

"*Who has insisted?* " I had searched her memories and there was nothing in there about her supposed clandestine meetings with an anonymous tipster. Or maybe it was in there, but she was somehow blocking it from me. I was never completely sure if I was taking control or if she was giving it.

"You'll find out soon enough. For now, I'd appreciate a shower, a new pair of panties, a meal, and a little sleep. My head is killing me. Four hours, no more, and then we need to be on the next flight

out to Peru."

"*Peru?* "

"Cusco, to be specific. That is where I was supposed to meet him once we'd recovered the Box."

"*This contact of yours, how do you know you can trust him?* "

"I have no choice. Neither do you, and neither does Landon."

"*You do have a choice. Dante said they had a way to destroy to Box. You could let him do it. It would solve your problem.* "

She shook her head. "Dante is relying on a demon who was banished from Hell. Do you think I'm about to trust that over the person who has been right about everything so far?"

I couldn't argue. We had the Box, which meant I had control over Landon's fate. All I had to do was hang onto it. "Fine. I'll do it your way."

I wrapped myself around her again, taking away her control and relegating her to the subconscious. Controlling her was becoming so easy, it was almost as if I were alive again, and her body was my body. I stripped off my clothes, grabbed a fresh pair of undies from the pack, and went into the bathroom. Elyse might have had a headache, but I shut that part of her down, closing off the nerves so that I didn't feel a thing. I washed off the salt and sand and blood under a hot torrent of water, and afterwards wrapped a towel around me and ordered room service. I was nodding off when it arrived.

The sound of the knocking surprised me, and I jumped to my feet ready for a fight. The aggression turned to embarrassment as I went over to the door and opened it for the porter. He was an older man with a thick mustache and a pot belly. He stared at me, his face flushing, before pushing the food into the room.

"Bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a soda," he said. "Where do you want it?"

I motioned to the center of the room, and he pushed the cart in. His eyes lingered on my bare legs.

"I have some clothes that need to be laundered immediately," I said. "Can you take them, or do I need to call for someone else?"

He arranged the meal on his cart. "Hey, cool lamp. Where'd you get it?"

I saw he was looking at the Box, which I had been either tired or stupid enough to leave on the table. I was surprised he could see it at all.

“An antique store in Montauk. Can you take the clothes?”

He turned his head back to me, his eyes tracking top to bottom again. “I don’t think we have launder services on site. We can’t get anything back in less than twenty four hours. Did you say Montauk? I have a nephew who lives out there. Which store? He loves antiques, he’ll be pissed he missed this one.”

He could see the Box, and he was showing a little too much interest in it. “You left the food. If you can’t help me with the clothes, please see yourself out.” I leaned down and back, my hand searching for a knife. He was making me uneasy.

He put out his hands. “What, no tip?”

I couldn’t find a weapon, so I stepped towards him and put my hand on his throat instead, shoving him up against the wall. “Are you going to leave, or do I need to kill you to get rid of you?”

His face turned white, and his body fell limp. “No… no… I’m so… sorry. I just wanted… you know… a tip. I’ll go… please… please just let me go.”

I released my grip and backed away. He started running for the door. Once he was gone I slumped down on the bed, my appetite lost.

I’d only had the Box for a number of hours, and already I was paranoid. Just because he was Awake didn’t mean he was dangerous. He might not have even known he could See the Divine. Not everyone did. Besides, how could anybody possibly have found me so fast? I cursed myself for my foolishness. I had spent five years in Hell, and here I was falling apart at the first sign of trouble. Maybe instead of rejecting that part of me, I should embrace it? It might be the only thing that could help me in the hours and days to come.

There was one thing I was sure of. The sooner I got to Peru, the better.

I put the dirty, salty clothes back on, shoved the Box into my pack, and headed for the door. I should have just gone to the airport in the first place, and spoken to Elyse there, instead of wasting my time in the hotel room. I would’t make that mistake again. I could eat and sleep on the plane.

There was no point in checking out. I put the glove to my face, glamouring myself into a fat old woman before I fled the room, taking my time heading through the hallway and down into the lobby. When the elevator doors opened at the bottom, I passed by

the still-scared porter, who had wrangled up a security guard. I had no doubt the front desk was on the phone with the local police, and depending on what was said, I was sure the Nicht Creidim would be back on the scent in a matter of minutes.

I exited the hotel and grabbed the first cab I could, sliding into the back seat and slamming the door closed. I needed to get out of New York by land. The airports would be crawling with too many teams from too many sides before I could sneak a flight out. Which direction would they not expect me to go?

"Penn Station," I said. I could get a train from there to anywhere, and the crowds would be thick enough to keep me obfuscated.

A grin in the rearview mirror was my reply. The driver's head dipped, and I saw a flash of red behind his brown eyes. "My lucky day."

He didn't know who I was. He couldn't have known what Elyse was. I'd made sure to cover the Eye, and he shouldn't have been able to see through the glamour anyway.

"Excuse me?"

I saw his smile again. "Penn Station. It's a good fare." He turned his head to look at me, his smile widening even more, revealing a set of sharp incisors. A vampire.

"Hungry?" I asked, catching his eye.

He returned his gaze to the road. "You don't smell like a Divine. I don't See a Divine, and you don't look like a Divine. Glamoured?"

"Two pieces of advice. Mind your business, and keep driving. I'm not an angel."

He laughed, but didn't turn around again. He was silent for a couple of minutes, but I guess he couldn't help himself. "You aren't a demon either. Not a were, not a vamp… hell, you aren't even one of those newbie pricks that have been popping up recently, screwing everything up for the rest of us."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

"Not directly. Hey, I'm not trying to butt into your business. I'm just making some small talk with a fellow tortured soul, or whatever kind of soul you have. I'm not going to get to feed on you, I might as well chat. My name's Randolph, by the way."

Randolph. I searched my memories. "Not Randolph Hurst?"

That made him turn his head again. "Do I know you?"

I tried to keep my face from betraying me. Randolph had been

one of Merov's associates, in charge of the blood trade inside city limits. He'd always been a cordial vamp, a thinker instead of a fighter. Give him a sword, he'd just as soon prick himself with it. Give him a dollar, he'd turn it into a million within a week.

I'd killed Merov and Landon had shut down the exchange, and then some. It seemed now Randolph was stuck working as a cabbie. Or at least he was posing as a cabbie to assist himself with some other scheme.

"No, but I know you."

For someone like Randolph, that was the best way to break any thoughts he may have had about finding a way to profit from me.

"Demon, then," he said, "and not a minor creature like myself. There haven't been too many of your type around New York since the assault on that church. It's been great for business, but you know how some of our kind can be. Take away the leadership, and they resort to all kinds of bull. The angels being busy with the bigger fish hasn't helped on that front. They used to be great for keeping the less subtle fiends out of the way. Anyway, you come to set up a new hierarchy? If you have the guts and the power to do it, and you know who I am, then you know how I can help you."

He would be able to help me if that was my goal. He had connections to the entire global network of vampire families, and could swing me anything I needed. Except the one thing I did need. "I'm just passing through right now, but I may take you up on that offer later. If you want to get in good with me, tell me more about the angels and the 'newbie pricks', as you put it."

"Promises don't mean anything to us, you know that. You'll have to give me something of value. Information?"

I wouldn't have expected Randolph to be that easy. "The true diuscrucis is holed up in Montauk," I said. "I've seen her."

His face appeared in the mirror again, and I could see the dollar signs in his eyes. "How do I know you aren't lying to me?"

"I'll swear it on blood, if you pull over."

He didn't pull over. "We can work it out when we get to Penn. The angels have been gone since the church thing. Not a single seraph has stepped foot in New York, not one. Demons are going nuts, taking humans at will, and getting more bold every day. I don't know where the hell they are, I mean, one seraph can do a pretty damn good job here, considering the mess the other diuscrucis left us in, before he got trapped."

I wasn't sure if he had known about that. "You don't know where they went?"

"I've been asking around, just out of curiosity. I've heard things are worse in other places where there are still archfiends lording over the rabble, and that the ranks of angels have gotten thin enough they can't be everywhere at once. The diuscrucis took care of Reyzl and Merov, so there's a huge power vacuum in these parts."

Not enough angels to cover a city like New York? They were in worse shape than I had thought.

"Crazy times," I said. "What about the newbies?"

"You think the stuff about the seraphim is crazy? This is crazier. Ever since the diuscrucis got trapped, we've been getting more and more mortals turning up with pointy teeth, calling themselves vampires and trying to enlist in the families. Most of them we kill, but there have been a few who were strong enough to get in. It's not just vampires either. I've even seen a nightstalker wandering around the streets. Anyway, they're a problem. The weak ones are still strong enough to kill their own kind, and they aren't smart enough to do it without drawing the wrong kind of attention from the rest of us. Some of the strongest have worked their way into a few of the families, but they're still not the real deal. Who knows what will happen if they start reproducing, assuming they can. The whole freaking gene pool is being poisoned."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing that time. Elyse was concerned the changelings were screwing up humans, and Randolph was afraid they were messing up demons. It seemed nobody wanted them around.

"Only demons are appearing?" I asked.

"Yup, but that's not all. There are the ones that change, the ones that don't change, and then there are the ones that die."

"Die?" Elyse hadn't told me about that.

"It's a mortal epidemic, and if you ask me it's just getting started. Five hundred reported cases on the East Coast alone, fifty just in the last week. It seems they develop some kind of nasty black rash, run a fever for a few days, and then drop dead. Even worse, if we drink any tainted blood, we get it too."

Vampires getting a human disease? If there had been any doubt left that the Beast's power was at the root of this, it evaporated in that instant. "So how do you know who to bleed?"

“We don’t. Not completely. It’s a new game of chance, but the elderly have been pretty safe so far. If you had been an actual person, I would have taken you somewhere and drained you, had my fill, and then sold the rest. With the diuscrucis gone, the exchange is back in business, only now we’re trading for clean plasma.”

I didn’t say anything else. I just sat and tried to absorb what he had told me while he finished the drive to Penn Station. Dante was right that just having the Beast in the Box wouldn’t be enough. If his power was leaking out and infecting the world, it was only a matter of time before it either killed off or completely transformed humanity. Whatever we had to do to get Landon out, we had to do it fast.

“Penn Station,” Randolph said, about twenty minutes later.

The cab rolled to a stop outside the entrance. I held my hand out so he could cut it and we could seal the deal.

“Ah, no thanks. I believe you well enough, and I’m a little blood shy these days.”

“Suit yourself.” I pulled back my hand and pushed open the back door.

“Don’t forget what I said about being able to help you, when you’re ready.” He flashed me his toothy grin one last time.

“I won’t forget. Oh, and Randolph?”

“Yes?”

“There is one more thing you can do to help me. I need a credit card that isn’t connected to me.”

He shifted around in his seat, took out a wallet, and handed me a fancy card. “You have twenty-four hours, and then I’m going to report it lost. Don’t forget I did this for you.”

I smiled. “I’ll be back after I finish my current business. You’re the first vampire I’ll come to see.”

I pushed the door closed at the same time another older woman approached the cab. I considered warning her to the next one, but instead watched her get in and close the door.

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Two hours later I was on my way to Kansas in the sleeper car of an Amtrak train. The waiting in Penn Station had been tense, but we'd gotten underway without incident and made it out of New York unscathed. I'd spent most of the time standing on the platform, keeping an eye on the stairs, and reconciling what Randolph had told me.

The angels were dealing with archfiends, but the lesser demons were getting wild. It was an interesting approach, and it made sense. With the main power base gone in a given region, the other fiends would be spending more of their energy jockeying for position and fighting amongst themselves. It was a little more problematic for humanity, because there were some truly stupid Divine out there, but not as much of a problem as a concerted effort by a higher ranking demon could cause. As a side benefit, it would also allow me more breathing room to deal with the Box. The angels were stretched thin, leaving them mostly out of the picture. The demons were busy fighting amongst themselves. There were plenty of other players left, but every little bit helped.

I also spent some time considering the longer term picture of the changed mortals. If they were integrating into the societies of their new species, eventually they would begin to reproduce. Once that happened, would they become stronger, or weaker? Would there be vampires that could stay outside during the day unaffected, who didn't need to drink blood, but maintained the enhanced stamina and intelligence? Or would they lose traits that made them superior, the strength and longevity? There was no way to know, but it was certain this was just the first push on a domino.

My eyes glazed over from looking out the window at the landscape passing by. The trip was supposed to take a little more than a day to complete, with a couple of exchanges along the way, but I wasn't planning on going the full route. We'd be in DC in about an hour, and I would catch a flight there. It wasn't as far as I'd prefer to have gone, but I was navigating a delicate balance between time and distance. It wouldn't take the Nicht Creidim forever to figure out where I had gone, and if by some chance Sarah managed to get to Obi, the former marine could certainly hack into any transportation system he needed to help track me down.

I took the pack and pulled it up onto my lap, opening the zipper just enough to see the blue glow from the Box. It comforted me to look at it, and to know I was in control. With any luck, I'd be meeting with Elyse's contact before the sun had set again.

The power pulsed along the surface, running through intricate channels, brightening and dimming in tune to whatever logic the prison followed. I knew so little about it, beyond how its creator and the demon Abaddon had become trapped in it. The Beast had told me where to find it, once he had deemed me ready to make my return from Hell. I had been powerful then, in many ways much more so than I was now. I only had one weakness, that the Redeemer had turned into a strength.

I took a deep breath and put a finger on the box, feeling the warmth of the energy it fought to contain, the energy that was leaking into this world. I looked around at the people on the train. Would they change faster or die sooner because they had been so close to me? If the Box's power was like radiation, these mortals didn't stand a chance.

Returning my eyes to the Box, I wondered what he was going through in there. The Beast had tortured me once when I had questioned the need to bring Sarah into his game. I could remember

the pain of being torn apart and put back together, so slowly and purposefully that it made the agony more intense and immeasurable than any other kind of wound could. Torturing souls in Hell had been part of my training.

None had screamed the way I had.

"Final stop, Union Station," the voice said over the loudspeaker. "If you're transferring, please hold onto your ticket and check the board for track information. Thank you for riding Amtrak."

I didn't stand until everyone else had disembarked. Only then did I sling the pack over my shoulder and make my way out, the hidden dagger in my jacket ready to be used. Nobody stared, nobody approached. I was still in the clear.

A quick walk through the station, and I would grab a taxi to Dulles International. I had never been in D.C. before, and I was amazed by the construction of the station; a magnificence in marble and light that stood in stark contrast to the old dinginess that Penn Station brought to mind. The beauty of it distracted me, and that distraction almost caused me to lose the Box.

A gloved hand dug into my shoulder, stopping my brisk pace. I tried to turn around, to face my assailant, but a second hand wrapped up under my other arm and pinned me, shoving me towards the wall and an access door nearby. I could tell by the size of the hand and the feel of the person behind me that they were taller than me, and well-muscled. At first, I wriggled in their grasp, trying to kick at the feet or twist from the grip without drawing too much attention. For every movement I made, my attacker countered it with equal and opposite force, leaving me stuck in their grasp and moving to a more private location. I needed to get out of this now, because I didn't know what was waiting on the other side of the door. Had they been expecting me?

There was only one thing left to do, and so I let go of my control of Elyse and pushed myself towards my captor. I was too close to understand who they were, and I never got to find out. No sooner had I let go of Elyse than a blazing heat greeted my ghostly form, propelling me away. I only barely managed to latch back onto her before I was sent off into the distance.

"Damn. Will you cool it, Rebecca?"

I knew that voice, but how did he know it was me? I stopped struggling.

"I'll walk myself, Obi-wan."

His hands left my shoulders. As soon as they did, I spun around and struck out at him with the knife.

He was expecting the move, and he caught my wrist and pinched the nerve, making me drop the weapon. “Hold on a sec, will you? I know what happened, but I’m not here for Sarah.”

I looked up at him. His face was damp with perspiration and his breath smelled like alcohol. A rough Eye was painted on his forehead in… mascara?

“Then what are you doing here?”

He waved towards the access door. “Can we just get out of sight? It isn’t safe out here.”

I nodded. It was obvious he had come running from some drunken stupor somewhere, and I wanted to know why. I walked to the door and opened it. It was nothing but a small janitorial supply room. He pushed me in and closed the door behind us, stopping to pick up the dagger.

“I can’t believe he was telling me the truth,” he said, as soon as the door had shut. He used his hand to wipe some of the sweat away.

“Who?”

He grinned. “So, I’m at home, sitting on my couch, downing another shot of tequila when my phone rings. I pick it up, and there’s this guy on the phone. He tells me I need to track down an Elyse Everness, and to check transportation databases.”

He was talking fast, and the words were coming out a little stilted. I put up my hand. “Wait, slow down. I was at Sarah’s. I heard her say you don’t answer your phone.”

“I do when the battery is dead and it still rings. Anyway, he texts me a photo of this thing on my forehead, tells me to draw it with whatever I have, find out where Elyse is going, and get there. He tells me she’s really you, and you’ve either got the Box, or you will soon enough. I know Sarah, and she’s a sweet kid. I love her like a niece, but destroying the Box? Hell, no. I wasn’t helping her with that, I don’t care what Landon wanted. I lost enough already.” He put his hand on the wall to steady himself.

“Who?” I asked again.

“I’m getting to that. He tells me you have the Box, and you’re going to get Landon out. That there’s a way.” His eyes started tearing. “Too much dying, too much destruction. I can feel the balance you know. I know its in the crapper, and it’s going to get

worse without Landon. The angels have the Deliverer, but they can't be everywhere at once, and the demons will figure out they're being played sooner or later. Either that or Gervais will get them organized. He can't kill Gervais with it you know, because he's not a demon anymore. He's something else."

His voice sped up as he spoke, until I could barely make out what he was saying.

"Obi, get to the point. Who told you to find me?"

"Yeah, right. He's an odd one. British accent, kind of soft, like a trannie or something. Laughs at himself a lot. Said his name was… Matt?"

I remembered the demon Templar. "Max?"

He pointed at me and grinned. "Yeah, that's it. Told me he was waiting for us in Peru, but you weren't going to make it without help. So I tracked you down."

That's who was feeding Elyse her information? Why hadn't she wanted to tell me? I knew Landon trusted the demon, and that made me feel better about this whole thing. Elyse might have her own selfish goals, but it seemed we really did want the same thing. "I didn't use the name Elyse Everness to book the ticket."

"Of course you didn't, that would be stupid. You used an anagram of Reyka Solen, and you paid with a credit card you got from one Randolph Hurst, who happens to be a vampire. I put two and two together."

"You did all that drunk?" I was impressed.

He shrugged. "It wasn't that hard. I've already got the algorithms set up to track the known Divine in town. The bigger problem is that you were spotted the minute you got off the train. I was waiting right outside the gate, you just didn't notice me. They went to get some backup, but they'll be poking around here soon enough. We need to get on a plane to Peru."

"So you're going to help me?"

He waved the dagger in front of him. "I want to stick this thing into your heart for all the crap you've done, but first things first. Yeah, I'm going to help you."

"Fair enough. I deserve whatever you want to dish out. You have a car?"

"I can do better than a car. I pulled some strings." He flipped the knife in his hand and held it out to me. "We just need to get outside in one piece. Let's move." He pushed open the door to the closet

and peeked out. “You go first. I’ll hang back so if anyone tries to grab you, I can hit them from behind.”

I stepped in front of him, slipping out the door during a break in traffic and moving into the crowd. I was nearing the Center Cafe when I heard the first scream.

I took the hint, diving to the side as a round of gunfire echoed through the Station. Chips of marble scattered from the spot where I had been standing, and I came up from my roll facing the shooter. It was just in time to hear the extra loud boom of Obi’s Desert Eagle, and watch him drop.

I knew right away he wasn’t alone. The shooting had caused most of the mortals to run, to scatter in every direction that wasn’t near the now fallen Nicht Creidim. The decision hadn’t been unanimous. A half dozen or so stayed back, and even as the other humans shouted, cried, screamed, and fought their way past, they drew their own guns.

Obi was running towards me, and I raised my hand, holding up all of my fingers and then pointing behind him. He rolled his eyes, and then dropped to his knees, sliding along the floor to where the shooter’s body lay. He flopped over and levered it, using it as a shield against a sudden barrage. Some of the bullets skipped off the floor around him, creating more divots in the marble. Others found the dead man’s flesh. Obi’s arm reached out, firing off two quick rounds and dropping two of our attackers.

“Get outside,” he shouted back at me, leaving me to make a run for it while he hid beneath a corpse. I wanted to help him, but I only had the knives, and our enemies were too far away. “Go!”

I didn’t have a choice. I stayed low while I ran for the doors, where the rest of the people were fighting to get out. More gunshots rang out behind me, and I heard another shout and thud in the background. I joined the crowd, pushing through them and getting outside, finding myself face to face with a policeman.

There was no hesitation when I let go of Elyse and floated into this one, wrapping around his soul and taking control. I felt the hurt of his memories: the demanding parents, the disappointed ex-wife, the rebellious son. He was a good cop though, a straight-shooter with the best intentions.

“Get out of the way!” I started shoving the frightened mortals aside. “Keep it safe,” I said to Elyse, who nodded and kept going towards the street.

I hurried back inside as the whole scene fell quiet. Obi had emptied his clip, and apparently so had the Nicht Creidim. There was a frantic rush by both parties to reload, and Obi had to get out from under cover to do it. I took the policeman's gun from its holster and started firing, the bullets missing the target in my still clumsy hands, but doing the job of keeping them distracted. Obi saw me and jumped to his feet, running towards me and using my cover fire to escape and reload. I kept shooting while I rushed the three remaining attackers, my bullets still off the mark but managing to hit one in the shoulder. The other two finished replacing their clips, and I found myself in a hailstorm of metal.

Bullets ate into me, piercing my shoulder, my leg, my chest. My shell was wearing a vest, and so nothing vital got destroyed. I continued the charge, pulling the baton from my belt as I neared them, ignoring the pain of the wounds I was taking. I was out of bullets, but I could still fight.

They didn't bother with knives at this range. I was right in their face, and their guns rose, the muzzle flashes blinding me while the bullets found a better target in my face. I could feel the life draining from my host, but he had done his job. I let him go, giving him a few final breaths before he fell over and died, finding my way to the Nicht Creidim closest to me - a woman in business attire. I was angry enough that I barely noticed the pain of her memories while I wrested control of her body.

The next part was simple. I was too close to miss. I turned to the two men standing next to me and shot them both in the head. Once they were face down, I dropped the gun and started walking towards the exit.

Obi stood there, his mouth gaping. "Rebecca?"

I winked at him.

"Holy crap."

"Elyse is waiting outside. Go get her for me?"

"Yeah, sure."

He turned to leave, but I took hold of his arm.

"You need to shoot me first."

He looked at me, then down at his gun. "I can't…"

"You have to."

He shook his head. "No way. I know you're cold blooded, but I'm not going to shoot someone in cold blood."

I slid my hand forward and pulled the gun from his grip. There

was no ceremony to my suicide, and it left him visibly shaken. He stood there for a few seconds, looking at my ghost form.

"Max said you'd changed. I was hoping maybe he meant in a good way."

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It was one of the last places I wanted to be. It was one of those things that a person would never want to have to relive, or remember, and one of the worst experiences of my short mortal life. Not a total loss type of experience, but an embarrassing one.

"Awww, you look so cute," Charis said.

We were standing in the gymnasium of Philip Randolph High School. We were surrounded by teenagers decked out in their youthful finest. Other than the athletes, the boys looked awkward in their rented suits that didn't fit quite right, and the girls looked overdone in bright, frilly gowns that were too tight, or too short, or too revealing. Some random pop song was playing over the strategically placed speakers, and directly in front of us, swaying like a robot with his hands on the hips of Carly Lane, was one of P.R. High's biggest geeks.

Me.

"Daddy, you suck at dancing." Clara had been giggling at me since we had arrived in the memory, stepping out of the door of the eighteenth century mansion and into the door of the gym.

“What did I do to deserve this?” I watched my younger self shift from side to side, the anxiety obvious from a mile away, and flexed my leg.

The wound had healed when we had time-warped, thanks to what Clara called the ‘carryover effect’. We were using our connected power to change the Box, to recreate its world in the image of these memories, and make it as real as could be expected here. The creation countered Ross’ destruction, and so it had carried over to the damage done to my knee. It was still a little stiff, but it was good to know I could still recover from a hit if needed, even if Clara said it wasn’t safe to do a full regeneration.

“I think you’re adorable.” Charis had watched little me with a smile on her face from the minute we’d arrived. “Just think, in two years you’d be under arrest.”

“I wasn’t always this nervous. Just with girls.” I turned to her. “You’re like a whole different world.”

“A bad one?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Now.”

We’d been here for at least an hour; a long time considering how fast Ross had discovered us the first time. I wasn’t convinced his delay wasn’t intentional. Maybe he was hoping to catch us off-guard? We had passed the time standing there, trying to look like a pair of chaperones, though Clara had drawn a lot of confused glances.

I scanned the room, taking in all of the familiar faces. The captain of the football team, the cheerleaders, the glee club and the nerds. Everything had seemed so contained when I had been in school. Life had seemed so simple… and now? So much was happening behind the scenes. So much that most people would never have a clue about, and I was sure it was better that way.

Harold Nash wasn’t looking where he was going, and his shoulder bumped my arm as he stumbled by, trying not to let anyone see the tears in his eyes because his girlfriend had chosen a very poor and public moment to dump him. He muttered an ‘excuse me’ below his breath without slowing, and I looked back to where Tanisha Peck was watching him go with a sad satisfaction. It was hard to believe that the re-creation of my memories could be so lifelike. In fact, now that we had a few minutes away from Ross, it was amazing to me that we had made all of this inside a cube that would fit in the palm of my hand.

“Bigger on the inside,” I said.

Charis’ eyes told me she had caught the reference.

“Shouldn’t we stand closer to the door?” I asked Clara. She had moved us away from it when we arrived.

“The door doesn’t mean anything, dad,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. Again. “When we run, we don’t need to go through a door. Anything will do.”

I pointed to the other side of the gym. “Like a basketball hoop?”

“If you want to think of it that way.”

I didn’t think I would fit through the hoop. “So we just stand here and wait?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

I had been expecting Clara’s voice. The speaker wasn’t her. I looked past her to where one of the kids was standing. Tim. I had known him from the computer class we had been in together. He was tall, thin, brown hair and blue eyes, and smart, very smart. His idols were Aristotle, Copernicus, Tesla, and da Vinci. He had taught me everything I knew about hacking, and I guess in a way was indirectly responsible for me being here. Which is why it also made some kind of twisted sense that he was talking to me, as if he knew what he was talking about.

“What do you mean?”

He looked at Clara, and then Charis before putting his eyes back on me. “It’s all about positioning,” he said. “Think of it like the sun. All the planets revolve around the sun, and they have orbits that bring them in alignment once in a while, in a period of time that can be calculated based on velocity, gravitational forces, et. cetera. You’re like Earth, and he’s like Jupiter. If you never move, he’ll know exactly when you’ll be aligned, and you won’t have time to get out of the way.”

“Clara?” Charis asked, looking for confirmation.

“You’re cute,” she said. “It isn’t that simple.”

Tim looked offended. “Why not?”

“You haven’t accounted for interference. Variable gravitational force.”

“It’s minimal. You’re over-emphasizing the effect.”

“I am not.”

Tim smiled. “You are.”

“I am not.”

“Yes, you are. Don’t believe me? Just keep standing there. He already knows exactly where you are, he’s just waiting for the right moment.”

I had no idea what they were arguing about, but those were all the words I needed to hear. “There’s no harm in moving,” I said, reaching out and taking Clara by the hand. For a minute, I thought she would resist, but she followed along, with Charis bringing up the rear.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Does it matter?” I replied, pulling them towards the doors on the opposite side of the gym. We’d have to cut through the middle of the dance floor, and maybe I’d even have to come face to face with myself, but it was better than the thousand ton anvil that was Ross falling on our heads.

“See, I was right,” Tim said, watching us run. “You gained a few seconds.”

I still had no idea how he knew what was going on, but I would work that one out later. We reached the crowd of teenagers at the center of the room, and I very unceremoniously shoved geek-me aside. “Excuse me.”

The activity drew the attention of the real chaperones, who starting shouting to one another. A moment later the music vanished, and a couple of unarmed security guards moved into our path. I didn’t remember any guards at my prom.

“Not that way,” Clara said when she saw them. Both guards began to grow, gaining height, fur, and claws, until a pair of Great Weres were blocking the doors instead.

“Where then?” I turned around, searching for another way out. The kids were all backing away, leaving us standing alone in the middle of the room. I heard a scream, and one of the teachers arced up over the kids, coming to land in front of us, her head nearly severed from her neck.

“You remember Mrs. Trainor, don’t you?” Ross asked. I couldn’t see him yet, but the sight sent the others into a scattered panic. They rushed in every direction, trying to escape him, or the Weres, or both.

I looked down at the body of my science teacher. She had always been one of my favorites. “Clara?” We needed a way out. Any way out.

“Climb,” she said.

“Climb wh-“ A rope was hanging from the rafters. A rope that hadn’t been there a second ago. “Charis, take Clara. I’ll slow him down.”

“How are you going to do that?” she asked.

“Just climb.”

She didn’t question, because she knew it would only be a waste of time. She picked Clara up and positioned her to cling from her back. Then she started to climb.

I heard snarls and I turned to face the Weres. They were both coming at me, their huge forms covering the distance in a half-dozen strides. I realized as I watched them gather that I wasn’t the target at all.

I focused and pushed, sending a shockwave through the ground and shattering the wood floor with the force of my launch. I got there before they could lift off, using my momentum to grab the arm of one and swing him into the other, and letting it pull us all back to the end of the room. I felt my heart catch in fear as the wall of the gym came rocketing towards us. There was no healing here, and I was about to splatter myself.

Only, I didn’t. Somehow, I found enough of something to get myself turned so that one of the Weres was between the wall and me. He hit it first, with enough force to break every bone in his body, and to smash through the cinderblocks to expose the outside. I felt my body compress against his, his ribs breaking, and my own stretching to their limit. Then I tumbled to the floor, the wind knocked out of me.

“Your artistry was decent, but your technical was crap, kid,” Ross said.

I was on my hands and knees, trying to regain myself. He was standing a few feet away, and I could see Clara and Charis dangling from the top of the rope behind him. He noticed me looking back, so he turned too.

“Don’t worry about them. They can’t go anywhere without you, and you can’t go anywhere without going through me. Which, I don’t think I need to tell you, doesn’t look promising.”

I shoved myself to my feet, prepared to take my chances.

“You had me there for a minute, kid. It’s a weird feeling, not being able to find someone in a finite space. Then, I remembered something.”

“What’s that?” I shouldn’t have given him the satisfaction, but I

needed every second I could get to regain my strength.

He smiled.

“I’m the god here.”

He turned and waved his hand. The rope snapped, sending Charis and Clara into a hundred foot free-fall. In the same motion, he turned back to me and I felt my breath get choked off.

It’s a strange thing, when you think you have a chance, and then discover that you don’t. Thousands of thoughts race through your head at once, but in front of them all is the pain of failure, and the terror of knowing the consequences. We had been on the run for an hour out of an eternity. It might as well have been a millisecond for all the good we had done. Clara was going to die and this time she wouldn’t be back. Ross would cage us, and keep us, to flog and flay until the end of time, or until he sprung himself from the Box, and our torture continued back in the ‘real’. I would have hung my head had there been time. I would have at least felt that first drop of remorse.

It was all interrupted by the twist, the change in expectations that brought everything full-circle. My eyes were blurring, my throat was on fire, and Ross was standing over me, the satisfied, arrogant grin painted across his face. I could see myself in the reflection of his shades, on my knees, my face white. I could feel the life draining from me, the death that when added to Charis’ would reset this squared universe back into his design.

Then his face changed. The grin morphed into a scream, and a burst of light exploded from the corner of his neck, growing in intensity as the line moved from right to left until it severed his head from his body.

I had seen them fall, but I hadn’t seen Charis catch them. I hadn’t seen her use her own control of Ross’ power to rip a claw from the other Great Were’s hand, or come up behind him to use the improvised weapon.

“Some god,” she said, while the corpse tumbled to the floor. My ability to breathe returned, and everything around us began to crumble.

“Take my hand,” Clara said, holding it out to me.

I fell forward in order to latch on, and the world around us reorganized.

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We were supposed to have a police escort to Dulles, the arrangement that Obi had told me about. It didn't work out that way, due to the war zone the Nicht Creidim had created around the train station. Instead, we had been forced to steal another car and hope that in the aftermath it wouldn't be noticed until we were well away.

The ride was tense, and Obi refused to speak to me. I tried to explain to him about the sword, about His redemption, and about my desire to save Landon. He told me to shut up because I was making his head hurt more than it already did. He didn't want to know about redemption or the notion that I had been saved by God.

"If God saved you," he said, " it was an accident."

The words hurt, but I understood. Dealing with the Divine took a toll on everyone, and mortals most of all. It was more than the things he had lost himself. It was also the things he had to see and endure. The hundreds of dead they had left in their wake, innocent mortals caught up as pawns in the Beast's game, the violence and chaos of an undying war. He had a right to be angry, and in my

soul I forgave him for it.

We made it to the airport, found a flight to Peru, and were thirty thousand feet up only four hours after arriving in D.C. I felt relieved to be skyward, though there was a part of me that feared we had been spotted. It would be trivial for a fire demon to rip the plane right out of the air, and we couldn't count on the seraphim to protect us.

Maybe we hadn't been spotted, or maybe they had chosen to let us alone. In either case, the plane landed in Cusco with no interruptions. I spent the entire flight sleeping, waking to find my head on an also-sleeping Obi-wan's shoulder. I picked it up and shifted in the seat, and then shoved his arm to wake him. His eyes shot open and he reached for his gun, which had been glamoured as a laptop and put into my pack with everything else.

"We're here," I told him, pointing out the window at the cement and grass rolling by. "Did he say where to meet him?"

"No." He brought his hand up and wiped away a bit of drool from his lip. "Did you manage to make it through the flight without killing anybody?"

I glared at him for a second, and then looked away. Maybe I was being heavy-handed with my approach, but what choice did I have? It was the way I knew how to fight, and how to survive.

We were off the plane and walking through the terminal when Obi's phone began to ring. He pulled it from the pocket of his jeans and stared at it for a second before answering.

"We're here," he said. There was a pause while the caller spoke. "Crap. Okay. Be there in five." He hung up.

"Well?"

"Max has a lead on our first target, but he said they're getting antsy. We need to rendezvous with him at the terminal entrance. He's got a car." He started walking faster, his size forcing me to jog to keep up with him.

"Target? Obi, I don't know what the hell we're supposed to be doing here."

He shrugged. "Neither do I, but I've run out of things to trust, so I'm just going with my gut. If we've got a target, I'm going to hit it."

His fast walk turned into a run, and I sped up to keep pace behind him. We dashed through the airport, winding our way around the other patrons, who turned and watched us like we were crazy. We reached a set of stairs and Obi jumped, falling from the

first platform to the second fifteen feet below, and landing like it was no trouble at all. I couldn't duplicate the move, but my smaller feet took the steps faster, and I hit the ground floor only a dozen feet behind him. I could see the exit up ahead, a wall of glass and sliding doors with cars parked out behind it.

Obi barely slowed when he reached it, almost crashing through the glass instead of waiting for the doors to slide open. He shoved himself through the crack and then stopped, his head flailing in each direction. He saw something, and started towards it at a run.

I followed behind, trying to see past his body to whatever had clued him in. A limo driver in a black suit and cap, holding up a placard that said 'Solen'.

"A pleasure," Max said when we reached him. He threw open the door to a dusty stretch and helped shove us into the back. Then he ran around to the driver's side and got behind the wheel. He tore away from the gate, the momentum throwing me into Obi's lap.

"Get off me," Obi said, his hands finding all the wrong spots as he tried to shove me away.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Your paws seem to have a different idea."

He scowled while I pushed myself to the bench seat immediately behind Max. "Max, are you sure we need her?"

His laughter was musical. "I'm afraid so, old chap. Afraid so. Hold on."

The wheels screamed and the car shifted. I braced myself against the roof to keep from being thrown around again.

"Would you mind telling us what the hell we're doing?" I spun around and watched the forward view. Max was careening around the rest of the traffic, driving the long limo like it was a Lotus.

He turned his head to look at me. "Of course, of course. I've got a line on the djinn who has the Damned."

"The damned what?"

He laughed and turned the wheel, sending us around a guy on a scooter. He wasn't even looking at the road.

"No, no. Just the Damned. It's one of the Swords of Gehenna, the counterpart to the Redeemer, actually. We need to retrieve it."

Obi threw himself to the space next to me. "What do we need it for?"

"I told you already, lug nut. I want to get Landon out of the Box." He finally put his eyes back on the road, slowing behind an

old van before accelerating around it. “That’s not accurate. I want to help Landon get himself out of the Box. I think he can do it, but he’ll need a little outside intervention.”

“What kind of intervention? What are you talking about?”

“Balance, sweet cakes. In case you still haven’t wrapped your mind around it, everything that has happened was meant to happen. In fact, it’s all going rather swimmingly.”

Obi’s face began to flush, and he looked like he wanted to strangle the Templar. “Swimmingly? Are you kidding me?”

“It’s a long story, but for now I think it’s enough to say that even if Landon had known he was part of the bigger plan, he would have been more eager to go along with it, not less. I’m driving this limo a hundred kilometers per hour for a reason.”

“So you’re saying there’s a way out?” I asked.

He looked back at me and nodded vigorously. “Of course there’s a way out. There’s always been a way out, it just… well… let us find the djinn and the Damned first, and then I’ll tell you everything I know. If we don’t recover the swords, my words are wind.”

He blew around a Toyota and sped up even more. Within minutes, we had entered the main city of Cusco, and were captured by the downtown traffic.

“How did you hear about this djinn?” I asked, looking out the window to the mountains surrounding us.

“I’ve always known about this djinn, and I’ve always known he has the Damned. I also know who gave it to him.”

“How?” Obi asked. His eyes darted back and forth, taking in the sights of the city, right now a line of cars traveling in both directions down the main square, with pedestrians walking on either side.

Max’s laughter was loud and deep. “I’ll give you a hint. He’s driving this car.”

I was confused before. I was more confused now. “You gave it to him? So why don’t you just ask for it back?”

“I wish I could, my sweet. I’m afraid he’s grown quite partial to my gift, and is less than willing to return it. I’m hoping to convince him, but if not…”

He didn’t need to finish the statement, but I wasn’t sure how we were supposed to help him handle a djinn. I didn’t even know what kind of power they held beyond Kafrit’s ability to extract absorbed souls.

The car came to a sudden stop, pushing Obi and I into the back of the seat.

“Time to run,” Max said, opening his door. Our doors opened at the same time, and we poured out of the limo while the cars behind us began to honk and their drivers started to scream. “Too-da-loo!” Max waved to them.

We followed him at a run, across the thoroughfare and down a smaller street. Left, then right, two blocks, and then left again at a full sprint. Nobody seemed to notice the demon, but Obi and I were mortal, and we didn’t get any such invisibility. Every eye followed us when we passed.

One more right turn, and we were standing in a small alley where a woman was sitting against a stone wall, a large white dog laying at her side, its head in her lap. She looked up as we came to a stop in front of her.

“Abaz?” Max asked, his deep voice echoing down the alley. “Come on, my furry friend. I know it’s you.”

The dog lifted its head lazily, turned and licked the woman’s face. She stood up.

“A strange congregation. Who are you?”

She was wearing a long gypsy skirt, a white linen blouse, and sandals. Her skin was a dark olive, her hair brown and sun drenched. Every finger wore a different ring, and her neck was submerged in chains. If the dog was a djinn, this woman had to be a witch, a servant to the Divine lounging next to her.

“My name is Max-“

“No, not you.” She put up her hand, one of the rings flashed, and Max froze in place. “You.” She pointed at me. “You wear the Eye. Who are you?”

“Let him go, and I’ll answer your question,” I said.

“Answer my question anyway.” Another ring flashed, and I felt some kind of power roll through. I was reminded of Sarah’s attempt to Command me.

“Maybe I won’t,” I replied, moving towards her.

She wasn’t afraid, but she shifted her head, curious. “Immune?” She looked over at the dog.

I heard a click next to me, and saw that Obi had pulled his gun. He was aiming it at the dog. “We don’t have a lot of time for games. Are you Abaz, or not?”

I didn’t see it happen, but one moment the Desert Eagle was in

the former marine's hand, and the next it wasn't. He was left standing there, pantomiming.

"Not," the smooth voice said. The dog was gone, replaced with a small man with a thin mustache and flat nose, dressed in a white linen suit and holding Obi's gun.

"I can get a message to him, for a price," the witch said.

"We need to see him in person," I said. "What's the price for that?"

"Tell me who you are, and then I'll name my price."

I looked back and forth between the djinn and the witch. Who was a slave to who?

"My name is Elyse, I'm-"

I didn't get to finish before the djinn was behind me with a knife to my throat.

"I didn't ask for the name of your shell," she said. "I asked for your name."

I saw it now, the Eye etched into the ring she wore on her right pinkie. It was an otherwise plain, tin thing that looked loose on her finger.

"You can see me?"

Her head dipped and raised.

"My name is Rebecca."

The knife pressed against my neck, and I felt the bite of the blade and the warm stickiness of the blood it was drawing.

"No. Your real name. I won't ask again."

"Reyka. Reyka Solen."

The djinn was gone. The knife was gone. He was standing at her side again.

"See, that wasn't so hard. I've heard the name Solen before. Vampires, from New York. You're Merov's girl. Ah, yes, I see it now. The betrayer." She laughed. "No, I won't bring you to Abaz. You can't be trusted."

I had to hold my breath to contain my anger. We needed to see Abaz, to get the Damned back. I wasn't going to let some petulant witch stand in the way of that.

"Whoa, wait a second," Obi said. "What if we go without her?"

The witch's laughter got louder, and the djinn joined her. "You don't understand, Jedi. I know who you are. I know why you're here. I know what you want from Abaz. I won't give it to you. Like these djinn, the sword is ours. Go back to whoever sent you, and

tell them that the creator Himself can't pry the blade from our hands."

"That's not an option," Obi said.

She shrugged. "You prefer to fight over it? Very well."

There was no time. The djinn appeared behind me again, his arm wrapping around my neck and bringing the blade in to cut it open. I tried to squirm away, but his grip was ridiculous.

The next thing I knew, I was laying in the middle of the street, the leather jacket the only thing that saved me from some serious road burn. The djinn had stayed airborne until he smashed into the wall of the building on the opposite side of where we started. What the hell had hit me?

"You aren't playing fair," I heard Max say. Had he thrown me?

My confusion was lost when the ground started shaking. I propped myself up on my elbows to see the demon standing between the witch and us. His back had sprouted a row of spiked bone along his spine, and a pair of black leathery wings hung from his shoulder blades. He turned an enlarged, bony head back towards me.

"Uh… run?"

He turned around and grabbed Obi, his wings launching them towards the sky. A moment later, the walls on both sides of the alley collapsed inwards, putting a pile of rubble where we had been standing.

I got to my feet and turned around, looking for the djinn. His jacket was laying in the street, but he was gone. Max landed beside me, clutching an almost white Obi.

"What the hell, Max?" I asked.

"It's a long story, lollipop, with a lot of deceit and trickery involved." He looked almost embarrassed.

"Save the chit-chat," Obi said. "They're getting away."

"I'll get her," Max said. "Rebecca, can I give you a lift?" He looked at Obi. "I nearly broke my back getting you away from the collapse."

Before I could prepare myself, Max grabbed my arm and swung me around, and then wrapped his arms under my shoulders and carried us into the sky. We circled the city while the demon searched for the witch.

"There. That car."

I didn't see the car he was talking about. We launched from the

sky at a ridiculous speed. I could feel my hair whipping out behind me, and my face being pressed back against the bone. It was exhilarating.

We slowed when we neared the car, an old green Land Rover. I could see the djinn behind the wheel, the witch riding in the back. She didn't turn her head to look back at us. She tossed a small bag out of the side window.

We passed it by, and I turned my head to watch it tumble to a stop. A moment later, it began to grow.

"Golem!" The stone around the bag pulled in and gathered, rising up into the shape of a man. It started running behind us, chasing us. It was fueled by the power of the djinn, and it moved faster than Max could fly.

Max looked back at it. "I'm going to drop you on the car, okay?"

I didn't like the sound of it, but what other choice did we have? "Do it."

His wings shifted, and we shot forward. The moment we were over the Land Rover, he spread them wide and we were caught like a parasail, standing us upright and giving me one moment in time to drop onto the car at the same speed. He let go, and I fell onto the roof.

I only looked back once to see him land behind me, a black sword appearing in his hand. Had he picked my pocket? The golem slowed to fight him, leaving me to deal with the witch and her servant.

I took a deep breath and pulled a cursed dagger from my boot while I clung precariously to the small seam between the roof and one of the back windows. I felt the motion of the car, and I guessed what was going to happen. I swung my legs out of the way, letting them dangle from the side of the car as a stiletto punched through the sheet metal. It looked more like a syringe than a sword, and I could only imagine what it would do if it punctured me. Gathering my strength I pushed back and swung in, my legs going through the open window. I let go of the roof and fell inside, getting a lucky boot into the witch's face as a reward.

"Solen," the witch said.

She stabbed at my ankle with the blade. I could see it more clearly now, a cylinder of crystal with a greenish liquid inside. Poison? I pulled my left foot back and crossed over with the right, kicking her hand away. She reached out with the other and one of

the rings flared. Her touch on my skin itched, but she seemed confused by the lack of effect.

"You think a Nicht Creidim would go anywhere without protection from fire?" I threw my body forward and smothered her, knocking her against the side of the car.

"What about from ice?" I couldn't see her hand, but the next time she touched me, it burned as much as fire. I brought the dagger around towards her face, but her other hand came up and blocked it.

The pain of the cold was spreading. I had to get her hand off me. I gathered my weight and shoved myself back away, breaking the contact but winding up on the opposite side of the car. She smiled, and the door opened.

I should have fallen out, but somehow I managed to dig the dagger into the upholstery and hang onto it while I fought to keep my legs from dragging onto the pavement and pulling me away from my grip. I could hear the witch laughing.

"You have no power, Rebecca. There is nothing you can do."

I hung there. I had thought taking Elyse's body and having the power of the artifacts the Nicht Creidim had collected would give back what I was lacking, but I was being trounced by the first real demon I had squared up against. And she wasn't even a demon. Just a mortal who had somehow gained more power than she should have been able to. If we hadn't been in a speeding car I could have tried to possess her, but there was no guarantee that would work either, especially when she had an Eye.

"Sacerdos ab Ordinario delegatus, rite confessus, aut saltem corde peccata sua detestans, peracto, si…"

I felt a tug at my soul. The bitch was trying to exorcise me!

That was when I remembered the red crystals. I reached into the pocket of the jacket with my gloved hand, grabbing one of them, but then I hesitated. If I killed her, she wouldn't be able to take us to Abaz and the sword. If I didn't kill her, she was going to blast me to who knows where, and probably kill Elyse.

I glanced over at the djinn, still driving the car and ignoring everything that was happening behind him.

"…obsessum ligatum, si sit periculum, eum, se et astantes communiat…"

The pull was growing, a pressure that wanted to steal me away from Elyse. I made up my mind, taking the crystal and rubbing it

between my fingers.

"…genibus flexis, aliis respondentibus, dicat…"

I strained against the pull, feeling so much tension in every movement. The runes on the crystal began to glow, and it took all of my energy just to drop it at her feet. The crystal threw up a gout of hellfire, catching the witch off-guard and reducing her to ash in the space of a breath.

It also made the car explode.

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I felt the heat of it wash against me, and then I was in the air, surrounded by metal. The ground moved perpendicular to me, changing from gravel to grass. I curled up, hoping to minimize the number of bones that would break on impact.

Elyse was stronger than she looked, or at least the runes on her body held true. I hit the ground and half-rolled, half-slid along it, feeling the force of the impact, but not shattering beneath it. Finally, I came to a stop.

I looked up at the road. The car was gone, reduced to nothing but fragments. I had been lucky none of them had hit me. The witch was gone, dead for sure. The Damned? She'd had it stashed somewhere, and now we'd have to find it the old-fashioned way.

What about the djinn? Had he died in the explosion, or whisked himself away? I didn't know enough about their power to know if that was even possible.

I turned back the way we had come. We had joined a road headed up into the mountains, and behind me was a bit of pavement and a turn. There was no sign or sound of the demon

Templar despite the fact that killing the witch would have destroyed the golem. Where had he gone off to? I stared at the turn for a few minutes, watching for his appearance. When he didn't show, I took a seat in the road and waited.

An hour passed before they came around the corner, riding an old rusted motorcycle with an equally dilapidated sidecar attached. Max was driving, his form returned to its more normal visage and his head bedecked in a pith helmet and thick riding goggles. Obi rested in the car, his hand balanced across the front of it, Desert Eagle aimed forward.

"What took you so long?" I asked as the bike stopped alongside me.

"My apologies, pumpkin pie. After you killed the witch, I returned to Cusco to pick up our feisty friend here. It took me a bit of time to find transportation that wouldn't clue them in to our arrival from a mile away." He patted the worn seat behind him. "Shall we get going?"

"The djinn who was driving the car got away. I have a feeling subtlety is off the table. Anyway, I'm not going anywhere with you. First, give me back the stone." I held out my hand.

"A pity, that. I was hoping for a frictionless encounter." Max's face split in half from the length of his grin. He reached under the helmet and let the stone roll into his hand, then tossed it to me. "I was just borrowing it."

"How did you even know I had it?"

The question just made him laugh harder.

He patted the seat again. "We need to get moving, dearie."

I didn't expect Obi to pipe up for me, but he did. "Wait a second, man. Enough of this crap. First, what the hell are you? Second, what the hell are we doing here? You said you would explain when you had time. Ding, dong, the witch is dead. You have time." He jumped out of the sidecar for emphasis, coming to stand next to me with his arms crossed.

Max sighed, took off the helmet and goggles, and dismounted the bike. His normally mirthful appearance turned sullen. "You're right of course, General. I should explain myself to you. First, I'm sure Rebecca can tell you what I am."

I nodded. "In part, I can." I looked at Obi. "Max is a Templar, a Divine sworn to fight the Beast. He's also a demon, which I think makes him unique among all of the Templars. It also turns out, he's

more powerful than he's let on, and not at all what he's sold himself as." I turned my gaze to Max, angry curiosity gathering. "How a reaper has managed to survive outside of the depths of the pit for this long? I can't answer that."

"A reaper?" Obi asked. "As in Blue Oyster Cult?"

"Not quite," Max said. "That would be my boss. Or at least, the boss of all of the other reapers. As I said, sugar plum, it involves quite a bit of deceit and trickery, which happen to be my forte. Suffice it to say, Death is not very pleased with me right now."

Obi put up his hands. "Back the bus up, man. First, Death is a real… umm… I don't know… thing? Second, how are we supposed to believe anything you say, when you just said you're the God of Lies."

Max sighed again. "Obi, Obi, Obi… Death is not death. That is a process that is typically rather natural in mortals, and while there is a chaotic logic to it, it's self-managed. My Death is the Lord of Death, a demon whose main purpose it to torture murderers. People who have caused the death of others. The reapers are his helpers, and because they're assigned to deal with the souls of the violent, they're gifted more of Satan's power, via Death, than is typical. I'm not a god. Not even close. But I am a liar, a cheat, a thief, and an accomplished actor. You'll believe me, because you have no choice. You'll also believe me because above all things I'm a Templar, and my number one purpose is to rid this universe of the Beast."

I looked from the demon to Obi and back. I hadn't seen the former marine look happy yet, and he looked even less happy now. His shoulders slumped, and he stayed silent.

"What are we doing here, Max?" I asked.

"The Box," he said, "is a prison. A prison has a door. A door has a key. Or in this case, six keys. Three went to the demons, three to the angels."

I unslung the pack from my back and held it up in front of us. "This isn't a prison. I can let everything out any time I want to."

Max shrugged. "That is one way of looking at it, I suppose."

He knelt down in the road, taking a narrow dagger from somewhere on his person and scratching a square with a straight line through it. He drew two 'D's on one side, and a 'B' on the other. "This is the inside of the Box." He waved his hand, and the letters all moved onto the line. "This is what is happening now." The letters started moving across one another, but always stayed on the

line. “Landon and Charis fight the Beast, but the Box is a universe of its own, and as a result it maintains its balance. The Beast will win some, the disucrucises will win some, but neither will gain a strong upper hand.”

He smiled again. “As you know, the balance can shift and teeter before it topples. Like this universe, it can be toppled, but it won’t be easy.” He reached out and took my pack, unzipping it and removing the Box. “When the flow of energy changes color, that means the balance is shifting one way or another. Which way? I don’t know.”

The flow was steady right now, an even, pulsing blue. He put it back in the pack and handed the whole thing back to me.

“It’s no accident that Landon and Charis are in the Box with the Beast. It had to be so to contain him. Of course, I couldn’t tell him that ahead of time, because he might have altered his plans in an effort to find a more final solution, a solution that doesn’t exist. This is no trivial situation. It took Malize a millennia of meditation and thought, and two millennia of preparation to build the tree whose branches we now flutter upon like sick sparrows. Even so, our success is anything but assured. There are still so many factors and so many things that can go wrong - the future isn’t pre-ordained after all. Malize tried to guide the pieces into the right spot, but the game still has to be played to its final move.”

It was a lot to take in. A lot to consider. “My redemption?” I asked.

“Why do you think Malize gave Landon the sword? It wasn’t to stab you with it, per se, but it was one of the futures he predicted and arranged for out of many possible futures. It just happened to be the one that came to pass.”

“You’re saying we have no control?” Obi asked. “That our fate is some logic tree?”

The Templar shook his head. “Quite the opposite. Malize postulated what *could* happen. He didn’t see into some kind of threads of potential of what *would* happen. It’s an algorithm of possibilities.”

“Fine. Where do the swords fit in? You said that they’re keys?”

“Exactly. Keys to a prison. The power of the swords will hold the Beast inside, and give Landon and Charis the opportunity to get out.”

“And then what?”

Max looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“The Beast’s power can’t be contained in the Box on its own. That’s the whole reason they had to go inside in the first place. If you let them out, then what?”

Max raised his finger. “Ah… the confusion. No, my candy corn, Landon and Charis will come out, but the power that binds them to one another, and together to the Beast, will be left inside. He’ll still be trapped as he always was, like a fly to a glue trap.”

I felt my breath hang. “But, Landon and Charis… You mean they’ll be…”

“Mortal?” he replied. “Maybe, but I don’t think so. To be honest, I’m not sure what they’ll be, other than out of the Box and back in this universe. Will they move on to Purgatory? It’s possible. I don’t know.”

It wasn’t a comforting thought. Landon would be free, but as what? A mortal? A spirit like me? Neither were fates I would wish on him or his loved one.

“I know you thought this would be easy… but there are some… complications.” Max chuckled at his sarcasm. “First, we can only open the door inside the Beast’s original prison. It will allow us to capture his remaining power and get it all in one place. More importantly, the creature Gervais also has set his sights on the power of the Box, and since he has possession of the Redeemer and the only path back to said prison, we’ll have no choice but to bring everything he needs right to him. Third, we’ll need to keep an eye out for Baal’s daughter, Vilya.”

“What about her?” Obi asked, finally speaking up again. “She’s on our side.”

Max’s face darkened.

“She’s not on our side?”

“No.”

“But… she saved Charis from Hell,” Obi said. “She said she… crap.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Consider it for yourself. She rescues a Templar from Hell by allowing her soul to be absorbed, thereby insuring that she will have a direct line to the Beast when it all comes down. Not only that, she knows that she’ll have to be released from captivity in order for the diuscrusises to put the Beast in the Box.”

I did consider it for myself. “It sounds a little too convenient,” I

said. “How could the Beast have known what it would take for them to trap him?”

“His true age is almost beyond measure. You don’t believe he understands the rules of higher existence? In any case, I was masquerading as one of his servants while I was in Hell myself. Believe me, she’s a servant of the Beast. Sarah was smart not to trust her and tell her where she was hiding, but she doesn’t need to find Sarah. Gervais has the best chance of getting the Box back, and so she’s waiting for him to retrieve it. That’s when she’ll make her move.”

Obi shook his head. “If she’s a servant, why didn’t she try to help the Beast *before* he went into the Box?”

“Contingencies, my good man. Malize isn’t the only one who has them.”

“That’s great. Just great. So… Vilya and Izak have a death match. Who wins?”

“Do you want the bad news now, or later?”

Now it was the former marine’s turn to laugh. “Oh, now you’re going to tell us the bad news?”

“When the two most powerful demons in the world have a death match, what kind of collateral damage do you think that will create? The whole thing is a super typhoon that we’re not only going to have to walk right into the middle of, but we’re going to be forced to create in order to succeed.”

I shivered with a sudden chill that went right through Elyse’s body and into my soul. “Is there any good news?”

His eyes brightened, and he smiled. “Yes, my cookie. You can’t be killed. Plus, we’ll have the swords. It should balance things out a bit.”

I was really starting to hate that word.

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“Good evening. My name is Walter, and I’ll be your server. Can I get you started with a glass of water? Do you prefer sparkling or flat?”

I blinked a couple of times and looked at Walter. He was decked out in a fancy tux and bow tie, a picture of classic servitude. Charis was sitting across from me, a smile on her face and a glow in the air around her. She was vision of splendor and beauty in a deep red velvet dress. I returned her smile, but I wasn’t feeling comfortable. Where was Clara? Where were we?

“Flat is perfect. Can we also see a wine list?” Charis asked. Walter bowed and headed off to fulfill the request.

“Where are we?”

She moved her head in a slow arc. “You’ve never been here? New York City. The Oak Room. I came here once before, with Joseph.” She pointed to a table in a dark corner. “Back there.”

I shifted so I could see where she was pointing. I couldn’t make her out from here. All I saw was a slender leg that ended in a red pump. I could see Joseph though, his brown hair and stubble

framing his strong jaw and bringing out his blue eyes.

"Are you okay?" I asked. This memory couldn't have been easy.

"You're sweet for asking. I'm fine. I thought of this memory on purpose. I wanted to share this place, this time with you. I loved Joseph, but that was as far as it went. I know that sounds trite. You… you're more than love. I know you, inside and out. We've already been through so much together."

I knew what she was saying, because I felt it, too. Not that I had too much experience with love, or how it felt to be in it. I just knew what I would sacrifice, what I would do in her name. I knew I wanted her around, and I wished we could have a normal life, a house and a real Clara. Maybe it was simplistic, but it would do.

Walter returned with the wine list and the water. He filled our glasses. "How are we doing over here?"

"We're fine, Walter."

"Very good. Please, browse the wine list. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask. I'll be back in a few minutes." He headed off again to wait on another table.

Charis flipped through the wine list. This was way too normal and it made me uncomfortable.

"Where's Clara?" I asked.

"I sent her away," she replied, as if that was a perfectly normal answer.

"What do you mean… sent her away?"

"She's waiting in a limo outside, keeping an eye out for the Beast. Just relax, Landon, and you'll be able to feel her, too. I just wanted some alone time with you, while he's busy being regenerated. We won one, and we deserve a chance to celebrate."

I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. When I did, I could sense Clara as Charis had said, in a car in the street outside the restaurant, watching YouTube.

My next smile was authentic.

"I still can't believe it. You were amazing."

She shook her head, causing her hair to fall in front of an eye and framing her face in the most beautiful way possible. "I was desperate."

"Not that much of a difference."

Walter wandered back over and Charis ordered a bottle of champagne. I imagined it was expensive, but this was our construction - we didn't need to think about money.

“So,” I said, pausing. “I think this is the first minute we’ve had to rest since we met. Even that was… how long ago? It feels like a week and a lifetime both.”

“Yeah, everything’s been pretty rushed. Then again, time has little enough meaning here.”

“Or out there.” I remembered my battle with Abaddon, and what he had said. Ten thousand years, and for what? Looking at Charis, at least there was something to be grateful to have eternity for. “It’s just… I don’t know… if this were a normal relationship I’d be asking you about your childhood, and your folks, and your hopes and dreams. I already know all of that stuff.”

“Maybe, but I think some of my opinions of those memories are going to be changing. This place is changing us. How could it not? I remember what he did.” Her voice trailed off, and she looked down at her plate.

Walter saved the day, returning with the champagne. She snapped out of her pain and watched him pop the cork and pour.

“Are you ready to order?” he asked.

“We’re good with the champagne for now,” she said.

“As you wish.” He left again.

She raised her glass to me. “To you, and to Clara. Two bright points of light in the darkness of this hell.”

I had raised my glass with hers, but I flinched at her toast. “We’ll get out of here. I promise.”

Her smile was hopeful but unconvinced. We tapped glasses and took a long pull on the bubbly, and then poured some more. I lifted it to drink, but she put her hand on my wrist to stop me.

“Not too fast,” she said. “I want you to remember this moment, this setting. Commit it, just in case. One speck of normalcy in our lives.”

I nodded and took in the picture of the restaurant, the vision of her, the breaths I was taking without being on the run. I’d been dead for five years, and only now did I feel any sense of peace at all.

It was interrupted when the other Charis went storming past, Joseph following behind her. She looked angry, and he looked remorseful. I knew what he had done, what he had said. I knew what had happened after, in the heat of the apology and the tide of the emotions. Everything was always so urgent. Despite our shared affection and the fact that here we had a child, we’d had no time

for that.

Her look was mischievous. “You have a look in your eye,” she said.

I could feel my face flushing. “Just a thought. Maybe a regret. There’s something about you that Joseph knew, that I don’t. Not personally, anyway.”

“I could say the same about you.”

I laughed. “No you can’t, and you know it.” Nobody knew me that way. I’d never had the chance.

She licked her lips, and then pushed her chair back and stood up. “We should do something about that.”

My heart began to pound, the heat in my face intensifying. “What about Clara?”

She came over and took my hand. “She’s fine in the car. She’ll let us know if the Beast shows up. Come on, love.”

I stood up, and her lips met me there, soft and warm and filled with passion. We stayed that way for too long to be appropriate, and when she broke the kiss I was a puddle of goo. I reached into a pocket and found a wad of cash, which I dropped onto the table.

“That should cover it,” I said. Charis started dragging me towards the door.

We were out of the restaurant and passing through the bar. It was a stroke of luck, bad or good I’m not sure, that I noticed anything at all other than Charis, and even better or worse luck that I saw the smoke.

“Charis, wait,” I said.

I stopped and stared at the wisp of white air rising from the bar. It curled up into the sky and then spread apart into perfectly formed angel wings. I followed it back down to a slender cigarette, and the cigarette to dry lips mixed into a white beard. The head shifted just a little, just enough so that I could see that the smoker knew I was there, and knew I was looking at him.

“It can’t be.”

I looked back at Charis, who seemed just as shocked. I had a sudden feeling our consummation of the relationship would be waiting a bit longer.

I walked over to the bar. Charis and I found a space on either side of the man, and leaned in. We were nice and close, and when I made eye contact I was sure.

“Avriel. How are you here?”

“Who are you?” he asked, suspicious. “How do you know my name?”

I stared at him without answering. Avriel wasn’t supposed to be in the Box. Avriel had been set free. What the hell was going on?

“Well?” he asked again. “Who are you, and how do you know my name?”

Something had changed. Was Avriel himself, or was he Ross? Had he recovered that quickly? “Are you Avriel? Avriel the Just?”

He was deliberate, taking the cigarette from his mouth and stamping it out in a nearby ashtray. “Who wants to know?”

“My name is L-“

Before I could finish, he’d pushed his bench out of the way, and a wrinkled hand was headed for my face. I ducked under it just in time, but didn’t avoid the knee that caught me in the gut and bent me over.

“Get away from me,” he shouted. “Both of you. Get away from me.” He pushed his way past us and ran out the door.

“Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water,” I said.

Charis kissed my cheek. “I guess you still owe me.”

We ran after him.

Clara was waiting for us outside, leaning up against the side of the limo. I did a double-take when I saw her, because she had grown up again. She was barely a child anymore, now a teenager with all of Charis’ looks.

“Which way?” I asked her, skidding to a stop. She tilted her head behind her, and I saw his back vanish over the wall and into Central Park. “You could have stopped him.”

She smiled. “I didn’t know he was running away from you.”

“Ross?” This wasn’t part of the original memory, I was sure.

“No. He’s not strong enough. Not yet.”

“Come on.” I hit the gas again, and the three of us ran across the road, playing Frogger with the cars and vaulting the wall behind Avriel. We raced along the path, dodging pedestrians and keeping an eye out for a suit with long white hair, but he was gone.

“Lost him,” Charis said, pulling to a stop and looking around.

“Clara, you can’t find him?” I asked.

“Sorry, Pops. I’ve got nothing.”

I spun around, searching the trees. There was nothing but shadows. I walked over to Charis and put my forehead against hers.

“Whatever he is, he’s gone. We might as well go back to plan ‘A’.”

“Guys… gross.” Clara joined us, her eyes sparkling in the starlight. In the moment, I wished more than anything that we were normal, and she were real. Was it crazy to love a figment of your imagination?

“How long until Ross levels up?” I asked.

“You know time is meaningless, but if you want some kind of measure… three hours? Maybe four or five? Until he catches up anyway.”

Time wasn’t as meaningless when you could never get enough of it. I took Charis’ hand and started walking back the way we’d come. If plan ‘A’ was out, we could at least relax at the restaurant for a while, instead of standing around outside.

“Are you coming?” I asked Clara. She was standing behind us, just watching.

“Wait,” she said. I stopped and turned around. A dark shape was passing behind her.

“Clara!” Charis tried to warn her.

She must have known what would happen. That was the only thing to explain why she didn’t move. The creature pounced towards her, dark and slick and formless. A wraith, I knew. I had fought one before.

It was only inches away when Avriel burst from the trees, sword in hand, and slammed into it. Caught by surprise, it howled and stabbed out wildly with a dozen spears of sharp oil that the seraph avoided with seeming ease, twisting and hopping to the side, then charging back in with his blade.

Its face snapped out at him, sharp teeth in a huge jaw trying to wrench his head from his body, but he planted a fist into it and forced it to retreat. The sword came around in a wide arc and smashed through the blackness, sizzling in the night air and bringing an intense smell of frankincense with it. The demon howled and tried to run, but it didn’t make it very far. Avriel pounced on it and stabbed it a dozen times or more, until it finally lay still, and then vanished.

“Wraiths,” he said, probably the closest thing to a curse the angel could manage. He looked over at Clara. “Okay, fine.” He walked to where she was standing, unfazed by the whole sequence of events. The seraph fell to his knees and held out his sword. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

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The ride was shorter than I expected, and it didn't make me happy to learn I could have jogged there in the time I had waited for Max to show up. According to the demon, the name of the ruins was Tambomachay. At least, the mortals who were there saw only ruins. He insisted that it was much more than that, and had been for nearly four thousand years.

Unless you were into archaeology or history, it didn't look like much; a few stone walls sticking out of the side of a hill, with a picturesque landscape surrounding it. At the top was a row of four square arches that had been filled in with stone to keep people from trying to get inside, and two more of these arches rested near the bottom right, looking like they should have been going somewhere.

According to Max, they were. What we were looking at was the newest version of an ancient home to the djinn, a complex that had been built by the Inca in order to both worship and serve the Divine. He couldn't say what had happened in its history to put it in its current state, but he was pretty sure somebody had done something to piss the djinn off.

“Glamoured?” Obi asked.

We were standing right in front of one of the arches, looking at the cement.

“Not a glamour you’re used to,” Max said. “Djinn are a little… different.”

Obi knocked on the cement. It sounded solid enough. “‘Ha-ha’ different, or ‘oh crap’ different?”

“Just… different. It isn’t the glamour that makes it, it’s the power that keeps anyone out that the djinn don’t want in, both mortal and Divine alike.”

“We can’t get in?” I asked.

Max laughed “Oh, we can get in.” He reached into a pocket and withdrew a simple wooden ring. It wasn’t one of mine. “I took this from that djinn the witch was controlling. Possessing something of the djinn’s should be enough to bypass security.”

When had he taken it, while the djinn had his knife to my throat? I found the stone in my pocket, and gripped it tight. It was easy enough to picture needing to call on the sword, and finding that Max had stolen it again.

He walked up to the cement and pushed the ring against it. There was no sound, no fancy glowing lights, or anything that would suggest the ring had done anything.

“Perfect,” he said. He handed the ring back to Obi. “You can’t see it until you touch it.”

“Kind of lousy security,” Obi said, taking the ring and pushing it against the cement. “A retina scanner would be more effective.” He handed the ring to me.

“Trust me, muscles, only a fool walks into the home of a djinn uninvited.”

I put the ring against the cement, and it vanished in front of my eyes, revealing a long corridor lined in marble and gold, with flaming sconces providing illumination.

“I guess that makes us fools,” I said.

Max nodded. “Quite right. Let’s go.”

We walked in. There were no djinn here that we could see, but I was sure they couldn’t be far away. They had to know we were coming, so I expected we were walking right into a trap.

On purpose.

Again.

The corridor split at the end. To the left, the floor sloped

downwards, deeper into the earth. To the right, it stayed flat, but ended soon after at an ornately carved wooden door. From here, the carving seemed to depict two of the djinn's favorite things - alcohol, and sex.

"Not there," Max said. "This way."

We took the downward slope. It continued for a few hundred yards before evening out and branching to four corridors. These hallways were lined with simpler doors that gave no indication of their purpose. Somehow, Max knew where we were supposed to go.

"The gathering room should be riiiiggght… here." He stopped and made a right hook, leaving us staring at a smooth wall. "Of course, they don't want just anyone to get into their most important places. The ring?"

I pushed the ring against the wall, and passed it on. The smooth wall became a simple archway into a much grander room.

It explained the reason the floor had sloped, because the ceiling was a good two hundred feet away. The walls were mosaic, a menagerie of rainbow colored glass with an ethereal light behind it, casting bright shadows everywhere as though the room was encased in faceted gems. At the distant rear was a collection of fur carpets, large round beds, huge pillows, and a single golden throne, which sat empty. The Damned was clearly visible, hanging from the wall above the throne, a mottled and chipped chunk of iron with a midnight black hilt laced with gold.

Resting on one of the giant pillows was a woman, short and petite with long golden hair, dressed in a billowy purple velvet gown and covered in enough rings, chains, and bracelets to fill the display cases at Tiffany's.

"Hmm… this is unexpected," Max said.

I didn't have to ask him what he meant. In two rows running off-center of the room were cages, glass cages. Inside every single one of the cages was a djinn. They stood, sat, and floated, and looked generally unhappy with their predicament. A collective gasp rose up at the sight of us.

"Not a witch. A coven." It made sense. A single witch couldn't control a djinn, but a coven could combine power to do some pretty heavy lifting. "I take it the bitch on the bed is their leader?"

"I heard that," she said. She leaned forward onto her elbows and regarded us. She looked young, but I doubted she was. "You're fools to come here."

“That’s what I said,” Max replied.

The witch stared at us, amused. “You’ve come for the Damned. I’m sorry Samael, but you can’t have it.”

I looked over at Max. Was he Samael? Was that name supposed to mean something?

The djinn in the white suit stepped out from between the rows of other djinn. He had shed his top clothes, leaving himself bare chested, with two swords strapped to his back.

“Abaz,” Max said under his breath, ignoring my questioning glance. He motioned with his head to the cage closest to the witch. Inside was a diminutive djinn in a green vest and black pants. His head hung against his chest, defeated.

She looked at Max. “Come, Samael. Don’t pretend that you don’t know me.”

“You may know that name, but I don’t know you.” He didn’t sound convinced.

She slid to her feet and put her hands together. “I wonder… You don’t know me, you don’t remember me, or you don’t want to remember me? I was just a child when you brought the sword to Abaz, and asked him to keep it for your master. I was hiding in the shadows, watching. My name is Abalita.”

“Abalita?” Max’s eyes shifted back to Abaz, who had lifted his head to look at the woman. “I didn’t think it was possible.”

“For a djinn to have a child with a mortal? Neither did he, or my mother, but here I am.”

“You threw your own dad in a cell?” Obi asked. “That is messed up.”

Her eyes burned in green and gold. “Do you know how the djinn live, Obi-Wan Sampson? The alcohol, the gambling, the sexual gratification? They take on young girls like my mother, force them into a life of service in exchange for a thimble’s worth of power, and don’t even notice when they’ve died. They believe the world is for their pleasure, that all of life is for their pleasure. Did you know there are no female djinn? Not anymore. Where did they go, I wonder?” She looked over at Abaz. “I imagine they just got tired of it and left, and none of them even noticed.”

“I loved your mother,” Abaz said, getting to his feet and putting his hands to the glass bars.

“You did? How long ago did she die? Do you even know how old I am?”

Abalita seemed to forget about us, storming to the cage and pushing her hand against Abaz's chest. He cried out in pain and fell back.

"You can understand though, can't you Reyka?" She turned back to us, and approached me. She didn't seem at all afraid that we could harm her, and I doubted she was counting on the one free djinn to be her sole protection. "You killed your father for the things he did to your mother, and to you."

And would have done to Landon. "What's your point?"

"You understand the need to take care of yourself. To look out for yourself. To count on no one. You did what you had to do. You can't have the sword, because I need it. To protect myself, and to care for my family. The sword has more uses than to simply turn light to dark."

"Abalita, the sword is Cursed," Max said. "Whatever power you are pulling from it will darken your soul."

"More than growing up in this place, an afterthought to the whim of immortal children? I doubt that. The seraphim and the demons have a purpose for humanity, as despicable as it may be. The djinn use us as nothing more than toys, playthings easily forgotten and discarded. So I learned to harness the power of my birthright. I adopted the women brought in to worship them. I taught them how they were being deceived, and trained them to fight back. Now the djinn are our trophies. Samael, you know how strong the djinn are. The power of the Damned is the only thing that keeps them in their cages."

"We need the sword," I said. I understood her pain, and her desire to punish those who had caused it. In another time and place, I may have been more sympathetic. I may have even sided with her. Not today. Not when collecting the blades was the only way to get Landon out.

"I know."

She turned her back on us. I pulled the stone from my pocket and willed the obsidian spatha into my hand. The floor began to vibrate, and Abalita's sisters poured into the room. They were witches, all of them, their power that of the djinn. I didn't know if the blade could kill them without taking their heads. I didn't even know if I would get to find out.

Golems rose from between the cages, masses of stone pulled from the ground beneath the room.

“Rebecca, the sword,” Max said. His face began to change, his body shifting into pure reaper.

The shirtless djinn appeared in front of me, sword in hand, ready to strike. I brought the blade around to block, and then heard the echo of a gunshot. He fell away from me as quickly as he had arrived, thrown to the ground by the force of the bullet pounding into his skull.

“Behind you,” I shouted to Obi. He lowered the Eagle, a jagged Cursed blade appearing in his hand from somewhere on him. The golem threw a mountainous fist, but he jerked away and came back, the edge creating sparks along the stone shell.

“Man, why am I never prepared?” He slipped around another heavy punch.

“Rebecca!” Max had finished shifting, and his voice became deeper and more frightening. I put my eyes on the Damned, still hanging on the wall, though it looked like Abalita was going for it. I felt a wave of energy wash through me, a witch’s power bouncing off Elyse’s tattoos.

I started running at the same time I grabbed one of the knives from my boots. In one smooth motion I threw it at Abalita’s back. I didn’t know that much about djinn, and I knew even less about human-djinn hybrids, but I was sure she wouldn’t have turned her back if it had left her defenseless. At the last moment, she ducked to the side, reached up and snatched the dagger from the air, then turned and fired it back. It was the move I’d anticipated, and I dove forward, rolling under it and back up. I’d forced her to slow, and gained a dozen feet.

I heard screaming behind me. I didn’t know what Max was doing, but the witches weren’t happy about it. Then I heard a grunt, and he tumbled past me, a golem wrapped up in his arms.

More gunfire echoed in the enormous room, and an unmistakeable cry rose from the back, proving bullets were effective after all. Two more shots, a thud, and then it stopped.

Abalita and I raced onto the pillows and beds, towards the back wall where the Damned sat. I almost caught up to her, lunging forward and getting a hand on the rear of her velvet dress, tearing it along the seam and finding myself with a handful of cloth. I almost caught up. She pulled the blade from the wall and leveled it at my face.

“You’ve lost, Reyka,” she said. I didn’t hear any fighting behind

me, which wasn't a good sign. "Get up."

I took a deep breath and got to my feet. I dared a look to the back, to see Max being held by two of the stone golems, and Obi with the djinn's blade to his throat. Two of the witches lay in a growing pool of blood, and the others looked like they were ready to claw him apart.

"What about your sisters?" I asked. "The sword is darkening their souls, too. What did you save them from that the hatred and chaos of Hell is a better end?"

She looked back at them. "You have no idea."

"You know I do. They'll turn on you, and on each other in time. It may take hundreds of years, but it will happen. You've seen it happen already."

It was a guess, but the math added up. Abalita had to be nearly a thousand years old, if she had been alive when Max had brought the sword to Abaz.

"Only to those who are weak. Who don't truly believe."

"I'm not saying your father, or the djinn don't deserve to be punished, but at what cost to you? At what cost to these girls? How many have you had to bring in from the street to replenish your coven? How many lives have you ruined to continue your revenge?"

I understood it now. I understood why the witch had been out on the streets with the djinn. She hadn't been lounging, she'd been recruiting. It was the Damned, I knew. She had never been cut with it, but using its power had damned her all the same, only so slowly and subtly that she had never sensed the change. I also understood that once I would have done the same thing, and I wouldn't have needed the Damned to make it so. I had been born with that evil inside me.

Abalita looked past me, to the cage where her father sat watching the exchange. "It is my right."

"It is your undoing. Give me the sword, Abalita. Let it go, and there may be hope for you, and for your sisters."

She kept her eyes on Abaz. "They'll kill me. They'll kill us all as soon as they're free, and then they'll go right back to their misogynistic ways. You may be right that the sword has changed me, Reyka. Nothing will change them."

I followed her gaze back to Abaz and felt a cold shudder in my soul. His eyes weren't penitent, they were gleeful, anticipating that I

would convince her to let the sword go.

"You see it," she said. "I can tell that you do. You know what it's like, because you have lived it the way I have."

I had, and I could. That didn't change what I had to do. My path was set, and God had put me on it. Wherever the djinn had come from, I wasn't going to let them stand in my way.

Abalita still held the Damned, the point aimed at my heart. I had the obsidian spatha in my hand. Who was faster?

I brought the blade up and lunged, feeling the pain of the flesh as the Damned bit into it, and the wrenching of my wrist as the spatha bit into her. My breath vanished with the piercing of Elyse's heart, and I felt the power of the weapon seeping towards her soul like a bottle of spilled ink. I pushed back against it, wrapping her up tight so it couldn't pierce me to reach her, at the same time I used my momentum to turn around and pull the blade from Abalita's grip.

I stumbled back towards the front of the room, impaled, gasping but lucent. The cages had been weakened by the death of the witches. They shattered at the loss of the sword.

Abaz's eyes were frightening joy. I used my free hand to pull the Damned from my chest, the skin on my hand ripped open by the blade.

It clattered on the ground.

"Daughter," Abaz said, practically dancing onto the pillows to stand in front of Abalita. The other djinn were free as well, and one grabbed the bare chested djinn from behind, taking his blade and running him through. The golems turned to sand beneath their power, and the other witches all fell prostrate to their will.

"Why?" Abalita whispered in accusation. I couldn't see her, but I knew the question was directed at me.

"She wants to die last," Abaz said. I heard the breaking of bones, and the soft drop of a body landing on a pillow.

I dropped the obsidian sword and fell to my knees, my hands grasping for the vial of blood around my neck. Elyse had said it would heal, and I could only hope she was right. I wasn't ready to lose her.

"Abaz." Max was at my side, and he picked up the Damned. "Heal her."

"And why should I?" he replied. "She just forced me to kill my own child."

Elyse was dying, her body faltering. I couldn't get her hands on the amulet.

Max snorted. "A child that you couldn't have cared less about. That much is plain. She saved your life, you owe her the same."

Abaz laughed, a childlike cackle. "I may be immature, but I'm not ungrateful."

I felt a hand on my head, a fountain of warmth, and my breath returned. I drank in gulps, refilling starved lungs.

"We're leaving with the Damned. Consider your debt to Malize paid."

"Of course. Now, Samael, take your toys and the sword, and hope we never meet again."

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“How did you know Abaz wouldn’t kill us all?” Max asked.

We hadn’t wasted any time fleeing the underground palace of the djinn, taking the motorcycle from Tambomachay back through Cusco to the airport. Max had wrapped the Damned in a swath of Templar scripted cloth and rested it in the sidecar with Obi. We’d made the ride, and then he’d bought us all tickets on a red-eye flight to Seattle. So far, my efforts to get him to speak about his past, and the name Samael, had been fruitless.

“I didn’t,” I replied. “But I assumed that if you had left the sword with him, there would be an expectation that he would give it back one day. From what I know of djinn, that meant there had to be a bargain or a debt involved.”

“You couldn’t have known he would heal you… well, your host, though,” Obi said.

We were already through security, the Damned safely glamoured to a walking stick, which Max was using to great affect, hobbling along on it as though he felt as old as he seemed to be.

“I know what you’re thinking, Obi.” His words at the train

station echoed within me, and I knew he thought I was the same monster that had stabbed Landon in the back. “I was going to heal her myself.” I’d zipped the leather jacket to hide the hole and blood stains, but now I unzipped it a little to lift the amulet out from under my shirt.

He took a few more steps away from me when he saw it. “Oh man, is that?”

“Yes. According to Elyse, Landon missed a few.”

“And you’re okay with hauling it around? Doesn’t it remind you of anything, like the fact that you helped set the Beast loose?”

We stopped walking.

“I had nothing to do with the amulets.”

“No?”

“No. Charis made the amulets to draw Landon in. I was only supposed to tail him until he got the…” I stopped talking, realizing this wasn’t helping.

Max got between us before Obi could say anything else. “Children, please. Tit for tat, none of us are innocent. Let’s focus.”

“You’re one to talk,” Obi said.

“Yeah, Max. Who the hell are you, really? A demon Templar, who can turn into a reaper? Who goes by the name Max, but whose real name is Samael… oh, and you’ve been Malize’s errand boy for how many hundreds of years?”

The demon looked at both of us and pursed his lips. Then he motioned to a row of seats in front of one of the gates. “I see the good will is running out. It’s true I’ve deceived you and Landon. That is my forte, after all, so I will ask you this: how do you know you can believe whatever story I tell you? I can lie to the diuscrucis, and he can’t tell. What hope do you think you have?”

Obi and I didn’t sit, but we did look at one another, our animosity forgotten for the moment. “Damn it, Max,” I said. “How am I supposed to help you save Landon, if I can’t even trust that you *want* to save him? How can either of us believe a single thing you’ve said?”

He raised his index finger. “An excellent point. *Res ipsa loquitor* . You have witnessed my actions. You tell me which side of the balance they fall on.”

We were silent for a minute.

“Neither side. You’re fighting the Beast,” Obi said.

Max clapped his hands together. “Yes! You have the Box,

Rebecca. You have the Beast. I will help you rid this world of him, and return Landon to the place where he belongs. Whatever else I may do or say, that is the obvious truth."

"Fine, but the cat's out of the bag, Samael. Why not give us a little more context?"

"My name is Samael. I was human once, a mortal, many years ago in the time of Jesus. In my life, I was a singer, a womanizer, and a thief. I was handsome, and it made me good at all of these things, but most of all, I was a liar.

"Yet I followed the word of the son of God. I wrote ballads about Him, and worshipped Him while I lifted a purse or defiled a virgin. In some ways, I was the original diuscrucis, balanced in my deeds of good and evil.

"When I died and the tally was taken, the evil turned out to be greater. I should have gone to Hell, but Malize intervened. He spoke to Lucifer on my behalf, and I was brought to Heaven as an angel. Satan had Azrael to cultivate the souls of the damned. Malize made me his counterpart, the angel of death."

He closed his eyes and shifted, but not to the reaper form I had already seen. His face was light and delicate, his hair lustrous, his white robes flowing out around him, with tendrils of light trailing away and a massive pair of ivory wings spread out behind.

"Only Malize hadn't brought me up because he wanted death. He brought me up because he needed a liar. He told me about the Beast, and about his tree of possibilities. He asked me to serve him, and only him, even in the face of God himself, because of the threat the Beast posed to all that He had created. He convinced me of the need, and promised me an untold reward.

"In his name, I committed the ultimate sin and murdered a fellow angel, for no better reason than to fall. And I did fall, right into the lap of Baal, who took pleasure in my failure and made me a servant of Azrael."

His form shifted to that of the dark reaper. "I used my position of power to spy on Hell, and to keep tabs on the Beast, becoming Malize's eyes where he could not go. Many years passed, until one night I discovered a message from Malize, asking me to meet him. That was when he told me of the swords and bade me to collect each one and pass it into safekeeping. All except the Redeemer. I brought that one to him.

"I served Malize, and through him God, with my gift for lies. I

tricked Satan himself into trusting me, and it afforded me the freedom I needed to know everything I needed to know. I noted when the Beast appeared, and followed the words Malize had forced me to memorize. Thousands of branches, and I needed to be aware of every one in order to do my part. So far, I have."

Max returned to his human form, and regarded us with serious eyes.

"Let's just get this done so we can all get on with our lives, or afterlives, I guess," Obi said.

The demon's intensity vanished, and he clapped his hands together. "Right you are, my good man. Our flight leaves in forty-five minutes. Shall we?"

We followed along towards our gate.

"I know we're going to Seattle. What do we need to do once we get there?"

"Not us," Max replied over his shoulder. "You."

"Me, as in, just me, by myself?" I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. After our experience with the djinn, I was leaning towards bad thing.

Max stopped walking again so he could look at me. "Not all of the blades are being held by half-djinn with daddy issues. Getting the Deceiver back is going to be a bit more of a precarious proposition. I had originally given it to a Templar named Gavin St. Croix for safekeeping. It turned out his skill at deception was equal to my own."

"He double-crossed you?" Obi asked.

"More than that. I understand that the war between Heaven and Hell is just that. I accept there is a risk that anyone can change sides, at any time, for any reason." His eyes burned into me at that. "What I didn't expect or account for was that Gavin would not only renounce his position as a Templar, but that he would sell one of the Swords of Gehenna to a mortal, for no better reason than to live out the remainder of his days in material comfort." His voice had been rising as he spoke, and he nearly shouted the last few words.

"You're telling me a mortal has the sword? How come neither side has tried to get it back?"

His laughter was laced with his anger. "They have tried, but the sword isn't called the Deceiver for nothing. Whoever holds it can not only lie, but it casts a glamour on the soul that few Divine can see through."

“A glamour on the soul?”

“Everything changes. Your perception of what you hear, what you see, how you feel. The Deceiver is unlike the other blades, because you don’t know it’s been used on you until it’s too late.”

“I take it there’s a Heavenly version?” Obi asked.

“Yes. It’s called Truth. It counters the effects of the Deceiver.”

Obi laughed. “So, dumb question, but why don’t we go get that one first?”

“An excellent question, old chap. There is a time for everything, and everything in its own time.”

“Translation?”

“I have a plan to bring Truth to us. Besides, as I’ve said, Rebecca should be immune to the blade’s power.”

“Should be?” I asked.

“Don’t fret, my salted caramel cupcake. Thanks to your run-through with the Redeemer, you are uniquely situated to be able to see the glamours, but not fall victim to them. It’s one of the reasons we worked so hard to bring you into the game.”

A tree with a thousand branches, and one of them with my name on it. Max had said it was math, not fate. A potential, not a pre-determination. I hoped for his sake he hadn’t been lying about that.

“What’s the other reason?”

“Our target is a twenty-two year old, unattached millionaire. I think Elyse has the look, and I know you have the resume.”

“Are you suggesting you want me to seduce him?”

“In so many words.”

I closed my eyes, licked my lips, and tried to calm my suddenly pounding heart. It was a big ask, after what I had put Landon through. Except, that attraction had been real for both of us. This was just a game within the game.

“I’m not happy about it,” I said.

“I didn’t expect you would be, but our needs dictate our actions.”

“Can you shut up with your turn of phrases?”

Max smiled. “His name is Brian Rutherford. He’s the founder of Madalytics.”

“No way!” Obi said.

“You’ve heard of it?” I asked.

“Called the next Google, worth a couple billion dollars. Heck,

yeah."

The demon shrugged. "His father was Evan Rutherford, an entrepreneur in his own right. He was the one who bought the Deceiver from a collector in Belgium. I don't know about Brian, but Evan was Turned."

Obi deflated at the news. "Oh. You think he's cheating to win?"

"I think it's very likely."

We started walking again. The flight was already boarding by the time we reached the gate, and we waited our turn to be herded onto the aircraft. I shifted the pack from shoulder to shoulder, feeling the weight of it growing in my soul with every step forward. Science, I could do. Combat, I could do. Half-succubus or not, seduction had never been one of my strengths. At least, not intentionally. Now I wished I still had that Divine gift.

I settled in for the flight, thankful that Max had at least hooked us up with first class. The extra space was appreciated, and I stretched out and watched the take-off through the window. Obi had grabbed the aisle seat straight away, and offered the middle to the demon. Despite everything we were going through together, he hadn't thawed towards me at all. It might have bothered me, but I didn't need his approval.

"*Elyse* ." I let go, giving my host a chance to have a body for a while. There wasn't much she could do on the plane, so I decided that was the best time to let her out.

"Hey, Max," she said. "Rebecca's given me a little playtime."

He'd had his eyes closed, but now they popped open and he smiled at her. "How's my favorite human holding up?"

Obi leaned his head forward. "Wait. I'm not your favorite?"

"You don't count. You may not be Divine, but you still have some of Landon's gift in you. Elyse has gathered the power she has on her own."

"So, you're saying I'm your favorite overall? I can live with that."

Max and Elyse both laughed. In the moment, I wished that I could sleep without taking her body back.

"How are you holding up, Obi?" Elyse asked. "Max gave me a summary of what happened in Mumbai."

Obi was black, but his face paled. I thought he would be angry, but he stared down at his feet while he answered.

"It's more than that. To learn there's so much more out there,

and that it's even more ugly than mankind can be. To meet someone who wants to fight back against it, and learn that even he can't protect us without turning some shade of ugly himself. To still be a friend when half the time you want to punch the guy in the face, and the rest of the time you want to do everything you can to help him stay alive and sane. To fall in… I don't know. Not love, but there was something there. She died, and almost killed me. I still have nightmares.

"I spend my time always looking out of the corner of my eyes. Always ducking, always listening. Paranoid, traumatized, whatever you want to call it. I tried to go back to work as soon as I got a flight out. First call, a guy who was beating on his wife." He turned his head, to catch Elyse's eye. "I've never felt so angry before, as I do now. I barely have control of it on good days, and I have to drink myself to oblivion on the bad days, or else I know I'll kill someone. I'm not someone I ever wanted to be, and it hurts like hell."

"I'm sorry," Elyse said.

"*You're sorry?* " I asked. "*You'd have no problem killing anyone in your own family to get what you want.* "

"That's hardly fair, Rebecca. In many ways I'm the same as Landon. I just want humankind in control of their own destiny. Anyway, I was born and raised to fight this war." She was speaking to me out loud. Now she reached across Max and put her hand on top of Obi's. "I am sorry. Rebecca thinks I'm nothing but a killer, because of the things I've had to do. She doesn't always see beneath the surface of things."

A tear rolled from Obi's eye, down his cheek to splash onto the seat. He split his mouth into a half-smile. "Thanks, Elyse. I'm sorry you got stuck carrying her around. I had to find out what she was about the hard way."

I didn't say anything else after that. If I could have, I would have let go of Elyse completely, and let the plane fly off without me. Vampires were superior in strength, intelligence, everything. But now I saw that I was an idiot. All the years I'd chased after the demonic dream, to be at the top of the food chain and look down on everyone from above. It had left me a novice at truly understanding anyone beyond what I needed from them. For as sure as I was that it was my mission from God to save Landon from the Beast, I had to admit the truth to myself.

I wanted to be redeemed. I wanted to go to Heaven. It was as much about what saving Landon could do for me as it was about what it would mean for him.

If I could have cried, I would have done that too.

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“Waiting for her?” I asked, still trying to wrap my brain around what had just happened, and what was happening now. How could he be waiting for something that only existed because of Charis and I?

The seraph didn’t move. He just looked up at Clara.

“I accept,” she said, taking the sword from his offered hands.

“What’s going on?” Charis asked.

Avriel got to his feet, and Clara leaned in and kissed his cheek, then handed back the blade. “He’s here to help us,” she said.

“Avriel isn’t in the Box anymore.” It seemed an obvious statement, but now I wasn’t so sure.

“No, he isn’t,” Clara replied. “He’s only a piece, a small piece. A shade of the angel you knew, the one whose life you forfeit, and whose death haunts you.”

She knew because she was half me. “How can that be?”

“It is in the construct of the Box. When he escaped the piece was held behind.”

“I need to take you somewhere,” Avriel said. “There is

something for you. A gift."

I had a thought. A frightening thought. "Clara, if a piece of Avriel was left behind, couldn't a piece of Abaddon have been left behind too?"

"It's possible. I don't know. If the binding was intentional there has to be a reason for it."

"I have something to show you," Avriel repeated. "A gift."

"Show me," Clara said.

Avriel bowed. "Follow me. We must be careful. I can feel their power building."

"Whose power?" I asked.

"The Beast," Clara said. "He can't find us yet, but his energy is re-forming. He'll try to slow us as much as he can."

"Come," Avriel said. "A gift."

We had no choice. We followed behind Avriel, back out of the park and into the street. He stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled, hailing a cab like a lifelong resident. We piled in, with Avriel taking shotgun.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"City Hall," Avriel said.

"You said a gift. What kind of gift?" I said.

"I don't know. All I know is that I must remain to bestow a gift, and protect you until it is bestowed."

Not very helpful. "How come you didn't show up before now? We could have used your protection a few ugly deaths ago."

"I couldn't find you. Your energy was too weak. The longer you survive, the stronger it grows."

And the older Clara became. It made as much sense as anything else did in here. "Strong enough to defeat Ross?" Why not? He was still in the process of re-forming, while we were getting more powerful.

"No," Clara said. "Remember the balance. You can try to find him now, while he's weak, but his power grows faster than yours, because your power is his. He has a natural affinity to it that you don't."

Like a fish versus a dolphin in a deep dive. We'd need to come up for air. "Do you think this gift will help?"

"It can't hurt."

It was scary how much she sounded like me when she said that.

We rode in silence. I watched the city streets go by, trying to

find things I recognized from before I'd died. The world was a little different here. We were in Charis' memory, a New York from before I had even been born. So much was identifiable in a vague understanding of the past, and yet now it was the real present.

I was just beginning to ease into the thought when something hit the side of the cab and sent us careening towards a parked car to our left. I reached out to put my arm around Clara, to protect her from the force of the crash, while the driver screamed and Avriel threw open his door.

The windshield shattered and something grabbed the driver and ripped him out, still screaming. A large, twisted face peered in, a broken monster I'd never seen before.

It howled when the angel powered into it, throwing his shoulder against it and sending it flying off the car.

"Ross?" I asked Clara.

"No." She looked scared.

If it wasn't him, it had to be something else. I focused, throwing open the door from the back of the cab and climbing out, with Charis and Clara right behind me. Avriel was on the sidewalk to our left, standing opposite the creature, sword in hand. Almost twenty feet tall, with tree-trunk limbs and massive claws, it put Ulnyx to shame. The seraph looked outmatched against it.

"No time to spectate," Charis said, pointing. Three more of them were crowding us in, racing down the street from both directions.

I focused, feeling the power come pouring in, feeding my energy and strength. I pulled air towards me, condensing it, crushing it into a tiny space, and then tossing it out at the oncoming monster like a transparent bullet. It slammed into the creature, forcing it to the ground while half its torso vanished beneath the pressure. The results caused me to smile. For once, this was going to be easy.

Maybe I spoke too soon. I heard shattering glass, and a fourth monster exploded from a window above, coming down at me like a twisted knife. I focused, bunching my legs and springing up towards it, breaking its expectation of my fear and taking it by surprise. I wrapped my hands around its head and twisted, snapping its neck and leaving it dead before it hit the ground.

Still airborne, I could see we were in more trouble than I'd thought. Every side street had more of the creatures running down it, headed towards us like a hill of angry ants, and the first one I had downed had recovered and found its legs. I focused to soften

my landing and hurried to Charis and Clara's side.

"You're sure this isn't Ross?"

"Yes," Avriel said. He was splattered in black blood, but was unharmed.

"So Abaddon is here." As if things weren't bad enough. "He might want you, but we need you, so I guess we're your protector." I turned to Clara. "Can we leave the memory?"

"Avriel has been established here. You'll lose the gift."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear. The first round of reinforcements turned the corner and came into view. I looked around, desperate for a street sign. Greenwich and Warren. We weren't that far away.

"Come on," I said, running east down Warren. There were monsters coming at us westbound, which meant a collision was unavoidable.

"Right into them?" Charis asked.

"We don't have a choice."

We were in New York City. There was stuff everywhere. Trash cans, parked cars, street lights, windows. I didn't need to tell Charis what to do. Together we used our energy to pull everything in and throw it forward, peppering the oncoming creatures with whatever we could find. The front lines fell, coated in glass or smashed with sheet metal and steel. It reminded me of Mumbai, only here we had the power to break through the enemy. Here, we were the Beasts.

The realization was sobering. Destruction, chaos… was that all we were capable of, when it came down to it? What else had I done in the last five years? Every time I tried to take a break, to relax and create something - a relationship, a friendship, a life of my own - it all fell apart in another wave of bad mojo. Was that all there was to me? All that I existed for? Maybe Abaddon had been spot on. Ross had tortured Charis and me with visions of the life we could have had, or should have had. Would we ever get the chance to try that afterlife on for size?

Not today.

I could hear the hissing and howling behind us, and when I looked back there was nothing but a sea of monsters, tongues lolling, fangs bared. They chased us down the street, towards City Hall and whatever gift was waiting, their huge legs giving them greater gains than our own.

It wasn't much of a challenge to stop them. With a bit more

focus and effort, I was able to start pulling blocks of cement and brick from the surrounding buildings and send them backwards into the onrush, knocking them over, dropping them back. Few of the blows could kill but most of them could slow, and all we needed right now was time. I reached further away, finding mailboxes and televisions, bottles and cans. I sucked them in and threw them back out, in a rhythm with Charis that we couldn't have managed without Clara beside us. It was the truest test of our connection, the purest form of our innate togetherness.

Then Avriel fell.

It seemed impossible, an angel tripping in the street. Did he catch a foot on a crack, or was he pushed by an unseen hand? What mattered was that he wasn't moving and so we weren't either. We'd been able to slow them. We needed something more dramatic to stop them.

"There's too many," Charis said.

I reached out and grabbed Avriel's hand, pulling him roughly to his feet.

"How can a shade do this?" I asked. "How can a piece have so much power?"

Clara stood next to us, looking a bit older than she had only a few minutes ago. "We found Avriel. He must have found Abaddon."

"Or Abaddon found him," the angel said.

We turned to run, but the monsters had gotten smarter. They held cars up as shields from our debris, and the ones we'd felled were back on their feet. They drew in closer, threatening to surround us. The memories of Mumbai flowed back in.

"Now what?" Charis asked. The four of us stood with our backs together. I scanned the environment in search of anything we could use.

A raindrop fell.

Had we created it, somewhere in our subconscious? This was our world after all. I looked up at the sky, a starless sky. There were no clouds either. There was just… nothing.

I closed my eyes, feeling Avriel's wing against my back from below his jacket. I remembered Josette, who had given me the gift of holy rain to defeat the demon Reyzl. We could make it rain. We had an angel.

I smiled. I was sure Charis was smiling too. So was Clara.

"Avriel, got any good prayers?" I asked.

The creatures were closing in. With the connection, I was able to do something I had never done before. In a single thought, a single command, we pulled the rain from a cloudless sky and at the same time threw a wall of debris between us and them. Avriel began to chant, holding his arms up to the nonexistent heavens, and sending an arc of blue energy from us into the air.

The rain continued to fall, but it was different now. It tasted of salt and hope, and all around us were deafening screams of pain and the sound of sizzling flesh. It was my first effort on a much grander scale, and it didn't disappoint.

We stopped the rain when the howling stopped. We dropped the wall a minute later. The monsters were gone. Every last one of them.

"It feels good to have a winning streak," I said, first hugging Charis, and then Clara. Even the seraph looked satisfied.

"The gift," he said. "This way."

We weren't far from City Hall. It seemed odd that the gift would have been left there, but it was as good a place as any. We walked empty streets for the final few blocks, and then made our way onto the grounds.

"There's an old subway station," Avriel said. He brought us onto the grass, over to where a line of metal grating rested. "The gift is down there."

"Where's the entrance?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Lost."

I looked down at the grating. It wasn't a problem to move it, or to make an entrance of our own. I focused on the metal, forcing it to corrode. It only took a light kick to make it crumble, and then I could see the blue glass of a skylight beneath it.

"Be careful," Clara said. "He can feel the power. He's getting closer."

We needed to get in before Ross found us. "I'm going down."

I didn't mess with the glass. I just jumped.

The skylight shattered as my feet smashed through it, leaving me tumbling towards the cement below surrounded by blue slivers that reminded me of Christmas ornaments. The fall would have broken my legs at least, but at the last moment I seized the air and used it to break my fall; a single dash of heavy power for just an instant.

Avriel fluttered down behind me carrying Clara. He launched

back up through the new opening and returned with Charis.

We were in a subway station. A beautiful, ornate subway station. I looked back up at the other skylights that remained and at the tiled walls and arches. A sign over one of them said ‘City Hall’.

“There.” Avriel pointed to a spot on the ground directly beneath a round skylight. A spectral light was filtering in through glass that had no access to the outside, its beam focused on a dark bulge on the ground.

“That’s it?” I asked. I walked over and knelt before it. I don’t know what I had been expecting. Something impressive, magical and ancient. An artifact, or maybe even the Box’s version of the Holy Grail. Something with runes, at the very least. Templar script would have been even better.

I reached out and wrapped my hand around the grip, picking up the revolver and turning it in my hand, examining it. I knew it was old, because it was layered in dust, the exterior of the steel rusted and pitted. The grip wasn’t much better - the wood dry, cracked, and separating. It didn’t look like anything special, or anything that could harm Ross. It didn’t even look like it could fire.

I opened it up, looking into the cylinder. There was a bullet. A single, ordinary bullet. I knew it was ordinary because I dumped it out into my hand, rolled it over, and checked it for runes. Nothing.

“I don’t understand.”

I said it softly, a whisper, more to myself than to the others in the station with me. A single bullet to shoot Ross? It was the most obvious answer, but I couldn’t understand what made this weapon any different from any other gun we could conjure up or steal from a pawn shop. It didn’t radiate any power. It didn’t suggest any special capability.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and twisted my head. Clara was there.

“Maybe it isn’t time for you to understand,” she said.

I put the bullet back into the chamber, closed the cylinder and got to my feet. I turned to where Avriel and Charis were waiting. A shade of the angel had been held behind, to protect us and to lead us to the weapon. Clara was right. Maybe the power was there and I just couldn’t feel it. Maybe we weren’t strong enough. I looked the gun over one more time.

We just needed to stay alive long enough to use it.

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The first thing we did when we got to Seattle was pay a visit to Staples and buy a laptop for Obi. I was in charge of getting through Brian Rutherford to the Deceiver, but he was in charge of getting me in front of the guy in the first place. He'd picked out something thin and light, muttering about installing a secure operating system on it while Max paid.

After that, we'd settled in at the Hotel Andra, a boutique hotel near the center of the city, offering us quick movement to wherever we needed to be. Max also preferred it because its small size would make it easier to monitor and defend if need be. It was his opinion that we were stupid if we didn't think Sarah and Ulnyx would catch up at some point, especially with Dante able to show up anywhere at a moments notice. On one hand, he didn't sound like he was too happy at the idea of their involvement. On the other, I had a feeling he wanted them back in the game before it was over.

The only thing I knew for sure was that Max himself had pretty much said he couldn't be trusted.

"Anything yet, Obi?" I asked. We had rented two adjoining

rooms, and now I sat on the edge of his bed and watched his fingers fly along the laptop's keyboard. Every time I looked at him, I thought about what he had told Elyse. I tried to find sympathy for him, or empathy, or something that didn't feel selfish. So far that had been a failure.

"Getting there," he said. "I got a line into Madalytics, working on pulling up their calendar. Hopefully he's got something marked off that we can find you a way into."

"I have a feeling he won't be putting 'S and M session' on his corporate calendar," Max said with a laugh.

"Meeting with Mistress Pain?" Obi replied, grinning. "I could be wrong, man, but I'm guessing that's not the best outlet for Rebecca to do her thing."

"I don't have a 'thing'," I said.

Obi glanced up at me, but didn't say anything. He didn't need to. I bottled my angry retort and sat quiet instead.

"Here we go," he said a few minutes later. "I had to get into his Google account. He's got a meeting tonight with an investor. They're supposed to hit some restaurant called 'El Goucho' at eight."

"Business meeting? How is that going to help?"

Max put his hand on my shoulder. "Do you have any experience as a waitress?"

I looked up at him. "What do you think?"

Obi started laughing.

"What's your problem?" I asked.

"I think your definition of 'eating out' doesn't lend itself very well to this. Let me find something else."

"No," Max said. "We don't have time." He looked me over. "Waitress may not be the right part for you to play. No, I have another idea." He flipped his eyes to Obi. "Can you get into the restaurants reservation system and make sure Mr. Rutherford and his guest wind up sitting next to you two?"

"Yeah, sure man. I… Wait. What do you mean?"

"We can't have a gorgeous young thing like Elyse sitting in an upscale restaurant by herself. At least not at first. Here's what I want you to do."

Max explained the plan. Obi didn't like it, but he set to work on getting into the restaurant's booking system. At the same time, he ordered me to head out to Nordstrom to find something to wear. I

was fine with the denim and leather, but I couldn't argue its appropriateness. I unloaded all of the hidden daggers, pulled off my glove, and left everything at Obi's side, taking only the black stone that would summon the spatha.

"I know you won't let anything happen to this," I said, opening the pack to take one last look at the pulsing blue runes before letting it leave my sight.

"You've got that right."

I zipped it up and headed for the door. "Be back in a few."

I made a straight line to the elevator, and then out the door onto the street. It was a cool day, with a bit of mist hanging in the moist air but otherwise fair enough. Not that I would have cared much if it were sunny or raining - I wasn't thrilled to leave the Box behind, but I was happy to break away from Obi and Max for a while. Max was a little eccentric and I was still on the fence about how well we could trust him, and Obi alternated between grating and impossible. I knew a lot of his pain was indirectly my fault, but he didn't need to keep taking advantage of every opportunity to salt the wound.

That was only one of the thoughts that ruled my mind while I made the short walk from the hotel to Nordstrom. My head wandered from one thing to another: Hell, Landon, Elyse. I even went back to an outing with Merov when I was seven and he had taken me to some fancy store in the garment district and let me pick out a ten-thousand dollar gown to wear for my birthday party.

I was so wrapped up in the memories that I nearly ran headlong into a changeling. I angled out of his path to avoid a total collision, settling for his shoulder clipping mine.

"Excuse me," he said, his voice soft and meek.

I know he couldn't see what I was, and at first I wasn't even sure what he was. His face was red, his eyes downcast. He looked like he was in a bit of pain, his hands curled under a draped wool coat. There was no sign of the sense of superiority or the aggression that had marked my other interactions with the altered humans. Instead, he only looked afraid. It was the eyes that had given him away, an odd tinge of red, and his fingers. He hadn't realized that his sharp claws had dug their way through the wool.

I turned to watch him as he hurried past, and then across the street. His head darted left and right, on the lookout for something. It was suspicious in a way that captured my attention and didn't want to let it go. I should have continued on to the department

store, grabbed something short and tight that would attract lots of attention, and gotten Elyse's ass back to the hotel.

I had two hours, and I could find a suitable strip of cloth in a matter of minutes.

I followed him.

He walked for a while, east to the Pike Place Market, disappearing into the crowds of tourists there and making it hard for me to follow. I managed to keep the tail, flowing through the traffic and leaving an eye on his back. Watching him, I could tell by the way he maneuvered that he wasn't just hiding his clawed hands. He was holding something in them, and I wanted to know what.

He kept going, weaving through the foot traffic and jaywalking whenever he could. I stayed a few dozen feet behind, in the shadows when possible, and always with a few people between him and me. I stalked him like a cat, focused and intent, all the way to an alley between two old buildings.

I started running, eager to catch up before he could vanish.

I was too late.

The alley was empty - nothing but trash bins and leaky pipes. There were no doors he could have gone into, and no fire escapes he could have climbed. He had vanished into thin air. How?

I was trying to work out how he'd worked his Houdini magic when I felt a presence behind me. It wasn't the changeling, but the smell gave him away.

"Elyse."

I turned around.

"Father."

He was in a long overcoat and a fedora, the bulges beneath the coat unmistakeable. He was armed for both conventional and Divine warfare. Two more of the Nicht Creidim fanned out behind him. Elyse's sister Rae, and an uncle, Paul.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

He laughed. "That's the funny thing. I wasn't even looking for you. I was following the changeling. Now that I have you though… Messy business back in New York."

"You followed Ulnyx?"

He nodded. "It wasn't easy, but they weren't expecting we would know where to find them. I heard about what happened at the house. You attacked your own family? Really, Elle… I know you're stubborn, but don't you think you took it a little too far."

“Ken was going to kill me to get the Box. You would too, except you can see I don’t have it.”

“I also know you were traveling with the diuscrucis’ boy toy, the marine. I’m assuming you left the Box with him, somewhere in the city.”

There was no point in denying it, it was a big city. “True. Which leaves you with a decision. Do you try to kill me and find Obi on your own? Or do you try to capture me and get me to tell you where it is? Or do you let me walk away and tail me back to the Box?” Or do I let go of Elyse and take control of your meat? I wasn’t sure I could.

“Considering you’re out here unarmed, I’m leaning towards making you talk. Yet, I’m curious. Why were you tailing the changeling?”

“He intrigued me.”

“That’s my girl,” he said. “Do you know what he was carrying?”

I shook my head.

“An artifact. A scrying stone. I was going to use it to find you, which is why I’m also considering letting you go. I don’t want to harm you, daughter, despite your treacherous indiscretion. You’re willing to do what it takes to hold to your beliefs, and considering I taught you that, I can’t really blame you for it.”

A scrying stone? I hadn’t known something like that even existed. I could understand why Joe would want it. I also knew it could come in handy.

“Who is he bringing it to?” I asked.

“A seraph,” he replied.

“An angel hanging out in an alley?”

“Not an angel. A seraph.”

“There’s a difference?”

He shrugged. “There is to me. This one hasn’t died yet. He’s a changeling. The first seraph I’ve heard of. It turns out he’s been able to use his new situation to rally a lot of the other changelings in the city here, though I’m sure it doesn’t hurt that he’s rich.”

Was the world really that small? “His name isn’t Brian Rutherford, is it?”

“Bingo. How’d you know?”

I took a deep breath. So I was suppose to seduce a mortal seraph who was already at the top of Joe’s hit-list, and who was about to have an artifact that could tell him the future? I needed to stop the

chit-chat and find the were changeling.

I wasn't about to clue him in that I knew anything about the Deceiver. The question was, did he know? "I've heard he's been collecting a lot of artifacts. I wanted to find out exactly what, to see if he had anything that might help me deal with the Box."

"I can help you deal with the Box, Elle."

"No, father, you can't. Now if you'll excuse me, he's getting away." The only trouble was, I didn't know where to.

"Look around, sweetie. I think he's already gotten away." He unbuttoned his coat and spread it wide. He had a shotgun on one hip and a sword on the other. "Are you going to come quietly? I know your hand-to-hand has gotten better, but you're outnumbered three to one."

I started reaching for my pocket, to the stone nestled there against my leg. Was I being foolish? I wasn't sure.

Rae drew a pistol from a holster on her thigh. "Elyse, don't." She was older than Elyse, someone the girl had always looked up to. A beauty in her own right, with dark skin and almond eyes.

My hand stopped. I counted my heartbeats. One…two… I was calm, despite the situation. I dropped my hands to the side. "Okay," I said. I couldn't beat them like this. It was better to let them take me and then catch them by surprise.

"That's my girl," Joe said.

He started walking forward when I saw a dark shape falling towards him from the rooftop above.

"Joe!" I tried to warn him. I don't know why, because under different circumstances he would have killed me already.

He heard the vamp coming, and he twisted and raised the shotgun, falling on his back and firing up into it. The changeling cried out, thrown off-target by the force of the blast. He landed at Joe's prone feet. He wasn't alone.

The alley filled with changelings, jumping off the rooftops to land with us in the dark corridor. Weres and vamps mostly, but one of them was a nightstalker. He came down next to Uncle Paul and slammed him with a fist that sent him crashing into the wall, bouncing off and landing with a groan.

Rae started shooting, silver bullets tearing into the false demons and creating a din of pained cries. They hurt them, but they didn't stop them, and three of the changelings charged towards her.

I found the stone in my pocket, pulled it out and summoned the

spatha. A vampire came at me, claws leading fangs, and lost his hand and then his head to the blade. I ducked under a swat from a were, pivoted on the balls of my feet, and shoved the sword backwards into his gut, ripping it forward and using the flat to block a second attack. Behind me, Joe tried to get to his feet, but the nightstalker had reached him, and he picked him up by the neck.

"Son of a…" he thew punches into the creature's chest, but it didn't seem to notice. He howled in Joe's face and squeezed tighter.

I looked back down the alley. There was nowhere the changeling could have gone. There was no way he could have escaped. Yet these altered mortals were here, and they had to have come from somewhere.

It was the Deceiver, I realized. A glamour. It had to be. Max had said I could see through it, but that clearly wasn't the case. At least, not like this.

Another were pounced at me, and I jerked to the left and punched him hard in the kidney. He landed and turned, twisted in pain and opening his mouth to huff for breath. I loosened my control of Elyse, holding onto her soul but letting her take her body back.

"Rebecca, what the f-"

I saw it, as nothing more than a suggestion in the simplicity of my raw spiritual consciousness. The building to the right had a door. I could see it as though it too were an apparition, a transparent overlay to the visible lie.

"*To the right. There's a door.* "

"I can't see it," Elyse said.

"*Just go.* "

She ran towards the wall.

"*Two feet to your left, the handle is in line with your ribs.* "

She reached out towards the wall, moving her hand until she found the knob that she couldn't see. She pulled the door open and stepped inside.

"*Close it* ," I said. "*We don't want Joe to follow* ."

She pulled the door closed, and then we looked around. I could see the truth over the glamour - the dirty, cracked mortar of the walls, and the set of old steps that led down, overlaid with a small storage room filled with boxes.

"*There are stairs in the middle of the room. Old stone stairs. Climb*

down them. ”

Elyse walked forward more slowly, unsure of my instructions. “There’s nothing there. Just boxes.”

“*There are stairs. Do it. ”*

She put her hand up to her head. “Rebecca.”

“*Do it! ”* I screamed at her soul and she cried out in pain.

“I can’t see it.”

“*You have to trust me, Elyse. If Rutherford gets the scrying stone we’ll have no chance at getting close to him. ”*

She growled and stepped forward into the boxes that should have prevented her forward motion. When they didn’t stop her she started moving more confidently.

“*Down the stairs, right in front of you. ”*

The first step was timid, but then she ran the rest of the way down. We dove about twenty feet underground and spilled out into a long corridor of dirt and wooden planks. The glamour didn’t extend down here.

“That was-“

I didn’t let her finish. I took hold of her again, forcing her eyes to become my eyes, and her body to become my body. I continued the run down the tunnel.

It fed into an abandoned city, an underground world of wooden structures that would have been commonplace in the eighteen hundreds, but surprised me with their existence. They had been cleaned up, painted and patched, glassed and lit. I stumbled into it unseen, but now I could hear the voices of this secret world in hushed murmurs around me. What was this place?

I was on a wide street that looked recently swept. It continued a few hundred feet ahead, and I could see two more streets stretching off to either side. A neon sign over one of the larger structures read ‘Brian’s’ next to a flashing beard and mustache. I could hear eighties rock music pumping from inside.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I was here to get the Deceiver, and I had a feeling the sword was waiting for me in the old-time bar.

At least it looked like I might be able to skip the seduction after all.

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My first thought was to walk right in, head held high and nothing but confidence oozing out of every one of Elyse's pores. It was a part I knew how to play, having perfected it as the laughing stock daughter of Merov Solen, the weirdo who didn't think vampires needed to drink human blood. I had poured millions of Merov's money into the research, and all the while it had been a front, a way to distance myself from my father, and a means to get the diuscrucis to trust me. The Beast had told me that was what I had to do, and I had done it. I had played that part well, and it had worked to convince Landon I wasn't like the others. It was heaped in with all of my other regrets.

The idea of making a grand entrance as Reyka Solen fell to the curb when one of the patrons made their way through the open doorway of the bar and hurried past my makeshift hiding place in the deeper shadows. She had a look of concern on her face, and tears in her eyes, and I could only guess she was going to find out what had happened to the group that had jumped us. I watched her back disappear down the tunnel, and tried to decide what to do. In

two minutes she would discover their ambush party was dead, because I was sure Joe and family was too much for a bunch of new demons with zero fighting skill. She would come running back with the news, and then what?

At the same time, I had to assume Brian Rutherford was in there, and that he had the scrying stone. If I gave him enough time to use it, would he be able to know what I was going to do even before I did?

Whatever I did, I needed to do it fast. I left my place in the shadows and dashed across the lit areas of the underground village, keeping my eyes out for anyone on the streets. I could hear things happening in the other buildings - clattering plates, laughter, conversation. It was as though the changelings had come down here to find the normalcy that the Beast's power had stolen from them. And maybe they had. Maybe that's what they had gone out into the alley to defend.

I reached the side of the bar and crouched beneath the flashing facial hair. I had an idea, and a violent and simplistic backup plan.

"*Wait here* ," I said to Elyse, letting go of her and propelling my spirit form out of her body and into the void. I passed right through the wall of the structure, fighting to keep my energy focused on the motion. I needed to be fast to make it in time.

The place wasn't crowded. Eight changelings sat around a single old wooden table, directly in front of a bar where a nouveau-were poured drinks. The eighties hits were blasting out of an old jukebox hunched in the corner, and on the table sat a simple rough stone, covered in demonic runes.

My mark was there, sitting to the left of a young, bald man with a thick, trimmed beard and mustache and wearing blue jeans and a brown sweater. He had to be Brian Rutherford. There was nothing about him that would give him away as a seraph, but then again his back was covered.

"I don't like it," the mark said, digging his elongated claws into the table. "Whoever she was, she was good. I wouldn't have even noticed, except she smelled so sweet."

I'd underestimated him, thinking he wouldn't have picked up my scent. I pushed harder, feeling myself floating along the stale air, directly towards Brian.

"The question, Alex, is how did she know you were carrying the stone? I thought you said you picked it up at the terminal locker

and nobody saw you."

"I didn't see or smell anybody," Alex replied. "I tucked it under my coat first thing and got the hell out of there. I brought it straight to you."

"What is it?" The question came from a young woman on his right, a cute little thing in a jean jacket and linen skirt.

"I bought it from a dealer in China," Brian said. "It's supposed to have belonged to Jacob, or Isaac, or one of those biblical guys. You recite the Hebrew on the face and it will glow red whenever someone nearby means you harm. Well, means me harm, anyway. It only works for one person at a time, but at least while I'm down here I'll know you guys are all safe."

Not a scrying stone? What was Joe trying to pull? I kept moving towards Brian, closing the distance as fast as I could. It was still taking too long for my comfort.

"I don't think you need a stone to know we're in danger, Brian," the girl said. "The others should have been back by now. It was what, twenty against one?"

I was only a few feet away from him now. I could feel the other people around me, their eyes all on or near the spot where I was floating, but I was invisible. I was taking a chance trying to possess a changeling. I didn't know if I could even do it, but my hope was that since they were still some kind of human, my grip would hold.

"I know. I'm worried about them too, but the entrances are hidden. There's no way anybody is going to be able to get in here."

Nobody, except me. It was my last thought as I plunged into his body, drawn to the warm throbbing of his soul. I reached out for it and wrapped myself around it.

Taking control normally meant pain, as the energy of a person's lifetime flowed through me, teaching me who they were in only seconds, and offering me the hooks I needed to latch on and become the driver of the mortal shell. I expected that when I joined with the false seraph I would either be met with this pain or cast out entirely, to find myself back in the emptiness of the strange space between all of God's places.

Neither of those things happened.

Instead, I found myself in an open field, laying on the grass, with way too much sunshine beaming down overhead. I squinted my eyes to ward it off and tried to bring myself up to my elbows to look around. A hand entered my field of view - large, strong, and

young.

"Are you okay?"

That was the question from whoever owned the hand. I reached forward and took it, and was pulled to my feet.

"My name is Brian. How did you get here? Actually… how did I get here?" He let go of my hand and rotated all the way around. "Where am I?"

I knew where, but I didn't quite believe it. I mimicked his rotation, taking note of the lush grass, the strands of evergreens, and the mountains off in the distance. "This is your Source," I said. Except, he was a human. He shouldn't even have a Source.

"My Source? I don't understand. Two seconds ago I was in the Underground with my friends. Now I'm here with you, which I'm not ready to believe is a bad thing, because you're amazingly beautiful." He took a breath and calmed himself. "I've learned not to trust anything I see."

I didn't understand either, but I was sure that I didn't want to be here. I closed my eyes and tried to will myself away from him.

"Hello? Hey. Do you have a name?"

I opened my eyes. We were still in the field. I was stuck.

"Rebecca," I said.

"Rebecca. Your name is as pretty as you are. I would remember your face, if I had seen you before. You aren't a figment of my imagination. My father used to tell me there were demons who could possess souls… but you aren't possessing me either. If I didn't know any better I'd say you were lost."

Did I look lost? I sure felt it. "I shouldn't be here. Neither should you. I'm not a demon. I'm not lost. I'm trapped."

"Trapped?"

"Here, with you. I want to leave, but I can't. I'm a spirit, a ghost. You can't see me, back in the real world. I don't always have control, and I… fell… into you. Anyway, this is your Source. It's a place in your soul where your power comes from."

Brian laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Just a strange way to meet someone, that's all."

I smiled. "God has a way of bringing people together."

"I guess He does."

I stared at him, trying to decide what to say. I needed to get out of his body and back to Elyse before things got any worse. "If you

have a Source, that means you're Divine. You can push me out."

"I've heard of the Divine. My father… he was a… servant. He made a deal with a demon, in exchange for wealth and power. He was a cold man. A ruthless man. He tried to raise me in his image. He told me about the war between Heaven and Hell, but he only liked to talk about how we could profit. I didn't want anything to do with it, with him. I believe in good, and if there is a war, I want Heaven to win. Everything I have, I've earned by the grace of God. I didn't ask for this."

His voice was rising as he spoke. By the time he finished I could tell he was near tears. I decided the best thing I could do was to play dumb and see what else came out.

"Brian? I don't know what you're talking about."

He put up his hand, and then pulled off his shirt. He was lean and muscular, but it wasn't his pecs that interested me. Freed from the cloth, a pair of fresh golden wings swept out to either side of him.

"I was in the hospital six weeks ago because I was having pain in my back so intense that I couldn't stand up. The doctors couldn't do anything for me, and after three days they sent me home with nothing but a bottle of oxycodone. Two days after that, these things sprouted from my shoulder blades."

He turned so I could see them in full. The skin around the base of the wings was a mess of scar tissue.

"You're changing," I said. "It's happening to a lot of people. You're lucky, because others are dying from it."

"You mean the bacterial infection people have been getting?" he asked. "You're telling me that's what, a Divine disease?"

"In a sense, I guess it is."

"I don't want to be Divine," he shouted. "I was there, when the demon came for my father. I was there when he ripped him open from nose to toes and ate his still beating heart. 'The price agreed,' the demon had said. This isn't natural. This isn't right. I'm not even dead yet."

It wasn't uncommon for demons to ask for such things as part of the bargains they made with mortals. I wasn't going to tell Brian, but his father had made a good deal.

"The people with you. I saw them. They were changed too."

He licked his lips and nodded. "At first, I tried to just live my life. Go to work, stay focused on my company. Then one day, this

guy shows up in my office, out of nowhere. He's covered in tattoos and jewelry. He tells me I'm not human anymore. That I'm impure. That I have something I don't deserve. He tried to kill me, but I have this sword… it's an heirloom… it lets me make people see things my way. I think that's what he wanted to take, and he didn't know I knew how to use it, or had the power to use it. I couldn't, before this." He flapped his wings a couple of times for emphasis.

"I don't know why you're telling me this," I said.

"The others. You mentioned the others. I realized it wasn't safe for me, and wouldn't be safe for anyone like me. Not human, not Divine - where would we fit in? I did my homework, went to shelters and paid to help spread the word. I can't believe how many people have come to me in so little time. I've being doing what I could to build a home for them, a place for them to be safe. There's just one thing I don't get."

"What's that?"

His wings swept back and forth again. "Why am I the only angel?"

I stared at him. I had been charged with seducing him, of lying and tricking my way into taking the Deceiver. Only now I had another way. A straighter path that I would never have dared taken in the past. The fact that he had become an angel was proof that he was a good man, a faithful believer, despite the sins of his father. God had turned me from the chaotic road to the benevolent one.

"Brian, I… I haven't been completely honest with you, and I'm sorry. I… I wasn't sure if I could trust you. If you know about the Divine, then you know how dangerous it is."

He stood and looked at me, his face turning hard. "Who are you? Did you bring me here?"

"No. Well, I might have brought you here by accident. I was trying to possess you. I'm sorry." Obi's words echoed in my mind. So did Elyse's. They all thought I was still a monster, less human than any of them. Even Max thought I was good for nothing but lies. "I was the one who followed Alex. I didn't know he was going to lead me to you."

I could see his jaw clenching, his doubts ebbing and flowing. He wanted to believe, but he needed more of a push.

"I wasn't the only one who's looking for you. There's a man, Joe, he's the leader of the Nicht Creidim. They're humans who want to destroy all of the Divine, including the changelings. The man who

came to you in your office, he was one of theirs. Joe confronted me in the alley where your people attacked us." I stepped closer to him, so I could put my face right into his. I could tell he was still unsure. "You have no idea what you're dealing with. Your people didn't come back because they're dead. The girl you sent out, she won't be coming back either."

He paled at the words, and his strong resolve crumbled. "Why? What do they want?"

"The sword," I said. I knew that had to be why they were here, and why Joe had lied to me. I had Elyse's memories, and I was sure they wouldn't have gone to such lengths for a ward stone. The question was, did he know that he could use the blade in conjunction with the Box, or was he after the weapon for another purpose, like to trick Elyse into surrendering it? "Do you even know what you have?"

He shrugged, and took a step away from me. "It belonged to my father, and his father before that. He said that if I would make a deal with a demon, I could make people see things that weren't there… illusions. That I could make every dream I could ever have come true." His eyes were sad when he stared into mine. "My dream is to be normal. I wish I'd never heard of the Divine. I can see them, you know. The vampires, the weres, the fiends. They mix in with humanity, but I always know they're there. I've always known. I wish I didn't. Anyway, the sword can't give me that. I'm becoming less normal every day."

"I need the sword, Brian. It's called the Deceiver. It was forged by a powerful demon, and it's a weapon of Hell. I need to take it with me, to stop what's happening to you, to save all of us from what's going to happen if I don't. You have no reason to trust me, I know, but I'm begging you. In the name of God I swear I'm telling you the truth."

He surprised me then, reaching out with his hand and using it to cup my face. I felt a warmth, a strength that wasn't human at all. If I had to name it, I would have called it the Touch of God, and it flowed into me and brought me to a state of peace I could never have imagined. It was a taste of the Heaven I was seeking.

He held me like that for a few seconds, and then nodded.

"I believe you. How do I push you out?"

"I'm not sure. Just do whatever feels nat-"

The field vanished, and I felt a wave of dizziness and nausea

overtake me. In an instant, I was back where I had started, floating in front of him, my mind a flood of emotion and desperation. It took me a few seconds to focus and regain enough understanding to capture the moment.

I didn't like what I saw.

Elyse was in the room, her arms pinned behind her back by Uncle Paul. Rae stood next to him, gun trained on Brian's forehead, while Joe sat at the end of the table, his feet up on the wood. Brian's head was resting against the table, where it had landed when he fell into his Source. The other changelings were immobile from fear.

"He's awake," Joe said. "Good morning, sunshine."

Brian lifted his head and eyed the man. He must have remembered our conversation, because he shot upright. "How did you get in here?"

I knew Elyse could see me, but she didn't give any indication. She sat still in her uncle's grip, submissive.

Joe laughed. "I knew your father. He was a real asshole, but he was smart. He knew how to stay under the radar. You, on the other hand. You've brought too much of the wrong kind of attention to yourself." He dropped his feet to the floor and slid his chair back, then stood and walked over to where Rae was waiting. He reached under her long coat, and pulled out a chipped and rusted blade.

"This is how," he said. "I know it doesn't look like much, but the truth is rarely pretty."

Truth? Max had said he was hoping the blade would come to us, and now I understood why. But Joe couldn't have had it all this time or Elyse would have said something. It was Uncle Paul. He must have been in possession of the sword from the start.

Joe walked back over to the table. "You don't look like you know what I'm talking about. If I hadn't gotten knocked down by your goons, I'd probably be in a better mood to explain it to you. Since I'm not… Give me the Deceiver, and I won't kill every single one of you."

He was lying. I knew it before he even said it. He was going to take the sword, one way or another. I needed to get to Elyse, to stop him before he killed Brian and everyone else in the room. I pushed myself forward, moving at what felt like a snail's pace.

"You're going to kill us either way," Brian said. "You can't lie to me."

Joe stopped smiling. “No, I guess I can’t.”

His arm twitched, and he had a gun in his hand, dropped from the sleeve of his coat. The changelings had overcome their fear, and they tried to rush towards him, but a single bullet to each of their foreheads shut them down before they could gather momentum. Within seconds, only Brian remained.

“You son of a bitch,” he said.

I was still too far away from where Uncle Paul was holding Elyse, but I was close to Rae. I changed course and concentrated, my soul crying out in searing agony as I made myself go forward. If I didn’t do something he was going to die, and both the swords, and Landon, would be lost.

“Give me the sword, and I’ll make it painless,” Joe said.

Brian might have been changing into a seraph, and he might have had a good heart, but he wasn’t a warrior. None of them were. It was up to me.

I felt myself move into Rae’s body, and I stretched myself around her soul, clamping down tight on her with the force of my desperation. Her memories flooded into me - her warrior upbringing, the pain of the tattooing and scarring, the nights she spent in the arms of her lovers. Her jealousy towards Elyse, who was younger and more favored.

I also felt her resist. There was heat, and pain like I had tried to step on the surface of the sun. I clenched my will and fought, pushing through it, screaming at the intensity of the memories and somehow finding my way to the other side. She was strong enough to fight back, but not strong enough to win.

Her eyes became my eyes, and I turned and aimed the gun at Joe’s back. I pulled the trigger and he fell forward onto the floor.

I pivoted to Uncle Paul, who pulled his arm tight against Elyse’s neck.

“Brian, get out of here,” I said. I didn’t know if he knew it was me. It didn’t matter. He skirted the table and ran, rushing past us and out into the underground.

“Let her go,” I said. I aimed the gun at him. I didn’t know how accurate my shot would be.

Paul smiled. “Fine.” He pushed her towards me, with enough force that I lost the target trying to catch her. As she stumbled into my arms, he began to chant. “Sacerdos ab Ordinario delegatus…”

I shoved Elyse aside, aiming to stop him, when I was thrown

forward onto the ground from behind. Before I could recover, the cold steel of a blade was in my back.

"I don't know who you are," Joe said, "but I figured there must be a reason Elyse put that Eye on her head. Thanks for helping us find the Deceiver. It'll sure come in handy to have her lead me to wherever you stashed the Box."

I couldn't believe it. Not only had Joe somehow survived the gunshots, but he had killed his own child to get to me. Paul was still speaking in the background, finishing the exorcism, and I could feel my spirit being pulled away. There was nothing I could do, no way to stop it. They would find the Deceiver, and they would make Elyse bring them back to the hotel. They would use it on Max and Obi, and waltz out of there with the Box, and with Landon. I felt the wetness of my tears in the eyes of my host.

I had failed.

"…Se et astantes communiat signo crucis, et aspergat aqua benedicta, et genibus flexis, aliis respondentibus, dicat Litanias ordinarias usque ad Preces exclusive."

The last thing I saw was Elyse, kneeling on the ground with a bruise on her cheek. She looked as defeated as I felt.

Then I was thrown away.

It was like being shot from a cannon. The world flew by at warp speed, a blur of color and earth, heat and cold. I was surrounded by a rumble that felt like God was either laughing or yelling at me, and then almost as quickly as it had started, it was over. Everything moved back into place, and I found myself out over the ocean. Waves rolled around me. A storm roiled in the distance. There was no land in sight.

There was nothing.

What I felt in that moment was despair. Deep and dark, it stretched into the pit of every emotion I had left in my disembodied soul and mashed it all together. I let out a non-verbal scream, a primal roar of defeat that echoed in silence into the water below, and the air above. I had been stupid, careless, reckless, overconfident. I had underestimated the Nicht Creidim, and how far Joe would go to get his hands on the Box. I had made a mistake in trying to join with Brian. Now it had cost me everything.

I was motionless. I wept with whatever faculties I held to weep. Time passed. It began to snow. The waves gained strength. The clouds darkened.

The storm tore the world around me while I suffered through my guilt and regret. It churned still as I forced myself to calm, and came to accept that there was nothing else for me to do.

I pushed myself towards what I hoped was east.

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We started walking, through the old subway tunnel and down the loop. We could have had Avriel air lift us back to the surface, but it just seemed safer in the enclosed space. I had no doubts that Ross would think of more monsters to conjure up and send after us. According to Clara, he was regaining his power, and biding his time.

She had also said that his death had allowed him to become stronger, like changing the locks on a door, or upgrading a computer. It was the balance, I knew. We were getting stronger, too.

I stayed next to Charis, while Clara and Avriel took point a few yards away. It was nice to have a little more time with her, even if was to walk in the dim light of the subway tunnel without saying much at all.

“It’s great to have some calm time to walk with you, but I’d feel better if we had a plan,” she said, echoing my own thoughts and breaking the silence.

We were walking a fairly long, straight stretch of track, headed

uptown. Not because we had a destination in mind, but because that's where the path had led us. We were wandering right now, twisting in the wind, waiting.

I hated it as much as she did.

"You're right." I reached back and put my hand on the pistol, feeling the splintered wood of the grip. "We need to figure out how to use this thing, and then come up with a way to turn the tables on Ross. A trap of some kind."

"He has a knack for slipping traps."

"Maybe, but we can't play defense forever. Besides, I don't think we need to hold him, we just need to lead him to a predetermined point. An ambush."

"That's easy to say. I don't think it will be so easy to do."

"I don't know. He seems pretty intense when he gets close enough. If he thinks he has a clear shot at us, or Clara, he might get a little reckless to take it. I mean, that's how we dropped him in the first place."

"You want to put Clara out on the end of the stick?"

The repulsion in her voice surprised me. "Charis… she's not… real."

"She's as real as we are, in this place," she replied. "And she's ours. Yours and mine. As long as we're trapped here, this is as close to a family as we're ever going to have."

"With one major difference. If she dies, she'll come back again. Just like we do."

She stopped walking and put her arm out to stop me, letting Avriel and Clara get further ahead. "She still feels it, Landon. Just like we do. It still hurts." Her whispers were fierce and intense.

I put my hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "She doesn't remember it, though. She isn't like us. She doesn't have a soul."

She swatted my hand away. "You don't get it, do you? She has a soul. Our soul. Yours and mine. A piece of each. She isn't a carrot, she's our child."

She started moving again, leaving me standing there, watching her back. I didn't hurry to catch up. A few minutes of breathing room might help her cool her head, and I needed time to come to terms with our difference in opinion.

I was still in the rear when Avriel dropped back next to me. His weathered face looked a little younger, and he seemed renewed for having a purpose.

“You look troubled.”

Said the angel who I had betrayed, and then failed. His suffering was still on my hands, and I felt the guilt of it burning through my soul. “Avriel. I know this won’t make any sense to you, but I’m sorry.”

He gazed at me and nodded. “Penitence is the path to God’s grace. I believe you.”

They weren’t comforting words, but they still found a place in me to warm. “To be honest, I’m worried about Charis.” I watched her up in front with Clara. They were talking and smiling. Was she wrong? Or was I?

“You’ve made a lot of difficult choices. I can see that on your face and in your eyes. I’m afraid that won’t end just yet.”

“What do you mean by that? Is there something you aren’t telling me?” The fact that he was even here was proof enough there was more going on than any of us had been let in on.

“I…” He paused. It was an uncomfortable pause, as if he was trying to decide what to say.

I reached forward and grabbed him by the neck, focusing my power to give me the strength to lift him off the ground.

“I’m sick of games,” I shouted.

Avriel was calm, even as Charis and Clara noticed what was happening. They both started walking towards us. Clara froze.

“Mom!”

The tunnel changed around us, shaking and twisting, bricks and mortar and dust churning up into the air. By the time I let go of Avriel, Charis and Clara were gone, a wall of stone dividing us.

“What the hell?” I ripped at the stone with my power, Ross’ power, desperate to get to the other side. “You’re supposed to protect us.”

“Landon!”

I heard Charis’ voice. I doubled my efforts.

“Clara…. Abaddon... Save her.”

I didn’t want to save her. She would come back, she always did. What was Charis thinking? I threw my body into the stone, hearing it crack beneath my shoulder. I rammed it again, and again. On the fourth try, I fell through.

Two tunnels. In one direction was Ross, holding Charis with her arms locked behind her, dragging her away. I could feel their power reverberating against one another, like the static charge of a

lightning storm. She was fighting, but we could only stop him together.

In the other direction, the dark mass of the demon that I knew too well. I couldn't see Clara through his veil of nothing, but I knew she had to be there. How had they taken us by surprise? Why hadn't Avriel warned me? How had Clara missed it?

"Go and get her," I yelled at him. "I'll go for Charis."

The angel didn't move. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

He looked like he wanted to die. "I'm not strong enough. I can't win."

Damn it. "You knew this was going to happen? The hard choice? It isn't hard." I turned to run after Ross. It would be better if we died together, than for me to lose her.

He took hold of my shoulder, his fingers digging in hard enough to draw blood. "No. I said that because of who you are. What you are. There are no easy choices for any who must walk the line between good and evil. It's a pattern that will repeat, again and again for all of your existence. The sooner you are able to come to terms with this truth, the more powerful you will become."

I looked from him, to Ross, to Abaddon. I could just make out Charis' face in the spectral light of old bulbs. She was resolute. She was willing to die so that Clara could live. No, so that we could both live. Ross needed both of us to restart the game. Charis was the carrot.

Avriel was right, this time at least. He wouldn't kill Charis because that would take away my incentive to follow. I threw the seraph's hand off me and chased down the demon.

Power fed strength into my legs, and I raced towards Abaddon with abandon, ready to tear him apart. I felt it when his cloak of despair folded around me. I felt my body weaken and my resolve begin to crack. It wasn't enough. Not now.

Then Clara was there, held tight in his arms. I grabbed on and twisted, hearing him scream as black blood ran from the broken limb and Clara fell free. She rolled on the ground, where Avriel scooped her up.

"That hurt," the demon said in his echoing voice. "You're stronger than the seraph."

I pulled more power into me, focusing on rejecting the pestilence and plague of his energy. I was reckless with anger and

hatred, my fists pummeling into anything that looked like flesh.

Abaddon laughed. He let me hit him a few times, and then a black hand took hold of my wrist and threw me backwards. “Not yet, child,” he said. His entire entity began to soak into a crack in the tunnel wall. By the time I got back to my feet, he was gone.

“Damn it!” I shouted, as loud as I could. The rage poured out of me, so hard that a burst of power exploded away, sending a shiver through the entire world.

“Dad?”

I looked at Clara. Her face was bruised, her clothes scraped and torn. So many emotions churned inside of me, but the maelstrom died at the sight of her. I fell to my knees, overtaken by an instant exhaustion.

She put her arms around me, enveloping me in the warmth of her shared spirit. “We’ll get her back. She’s part of me, too.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “How could he do this? Why didn’t you see him coming?”

Clara’s eyes dimmed. “Abaddon. He hid him somehow. I thought he was further away.”

“He can’t be the real Abaddon. He’s a shade, like Avriel. How can he be so strong?”

“Avriel destroyed the monsters,” she replied. “Both shades are strong.”

“I’ve been here for longer than I know,” Avriel said. “Most of the power in this place is his and yours, but I know how to use what I have better than any of you.” He pointed at the wall. “Except for him.”

I fought against the feelings of despair that threatened to conquer me. I had lost Charis, and Abaddon had escaped. “What are we going to do?” I looked at Clara. “As long as you’re here it means Charis is alive, doesn’t it?”

She shook her head in the wrong direction. ”No. You both need to die for him to change everything again. The good news is that for as much as killing her would weaken you, it would also weaken me. Ross doesn’t want that to happen now.”

I didn’t understand. “Why not?”

“The balance. As much as he hates it, he can’t break it without me. Not anymore.”

“If he wanted to kill you-”

“He can’t just kill me. As long as you and mother are alive, I’ll

only return. The two of you are like turbines. I'm a battery. He needs you both alive, but he also needs time to discharge the power you've collected. If he just kills me outright it will go back out into wild until I return. He can't simply claim it, because it's been tainted with the power of your connection."

I looked into her eyes, sparkling like gems despite the dim lighting. "He wanted me to chase him so that Abaddon could escape with you. He would have hid you from me, the same as he hid Ross."

She smiled. "Yes. If you had gone after him, he would have let her go and made his escape."

"Not if I had caught up."

"He would have let you kill him again. When he came back, he would know where Abaddon was hiding me and you wouldn't."

It made sense. It almost made too much sense. "How do you know all of this?" I asked.

"I don't. You do, when you take away all of the anger, and the guilt, and the joy. When you dive below the pain and look past the hope. Where your power, his power, is pure. That's where you can feel him, and begin to understand him. The Beast is a powerful entity, but he isn't without sentience or consciousness. He wasn't always the Beast. He wasn't always a harbinger of destruction."

She held out her hand and helped me to my feet.

"Once, many years ago, he was much like you."

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Obi was waiting for me the day I knocked on the door to room number 341 at the Hotel Andra. I hadn't thought there would be anyone in the room at all, but I had been able to hear the television from outside the door. It was twenty-seven days after I had been exorcised by the Nicht Creidim. I had spent twenty-six of them as a disembodied spirit, a lost soul floating across the ocean at a speed barely faster than a walk.

He wasn't the Obi I had expected.

The door opened. He was standing there in a pair of striped silk pajamas, his head newly shaved, with a month's growth of beard framing his jaw. His eyes looked lighter than they had the last time I'd seen him, as if he were happy.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

I wasn't surprised he didn't recognize me. I was wearing the skin of a homeless woman, a vagrant I'd found sleeping in the park near the waterfront. She was dirty and matted, dressed in soiled rags, and her teeth were killing me.

"Obi? It's me, Rebecca."

He regarded me without recognition. “Did you say Rebecca?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Either he was fast, or I was rusty. His hand shot out from his side and tightened around my wrist. “I have a message for you,” he said, smiling. “Sacerdos ab Ordinario-“

I still had a hand free. I brought it around and smashed him in the jaw, stopping him from going any further with the exorcism. I should have guessed by the fact that he was even here that I was walking right into a trap. Joe had gotten the Deceiver, and he’d used it to mess with Obi’s head.

Obi stumbled backwards before recovering, getting his hand up to block my second swing. His face twisted into a scowl, and he used his bare foot to kick me in the gut. “Sacerdos ab Ordinario…“ He started the rite again.

“Shut up,” I wheezed. I pulled away, and he held my arms tight, just like I wanted him to. I shifted towards him, and he couldn’t compensate in time. My head drove into his nose, and I felt it crumble beneath my host’s skull. He let go of me, dizzy from the attack, and teetered back to the dresser where the Eagle was resting.

I jumped forward and took hold of his arm, straining to tug him away. He was too strong, and my shell was too weak.

I let him go and backed out of the room. I used the break to look around, to confirm that my pack was gone, the Box with it. I didn’t need to be here, and Obi was useless to me like this. Where the hell was Max? Had he been caught by Joe, or had he escaped? I felt a moment’s despair, but twenty-six days as a free-floating spirit had given me plenty of time to strengthen my resolve. As long as I was trapped in this world I was determined to either free Landon, or avenge his loss.

I pulled the door closed behind me and abandoned the bag lady. She looked around for a minute, confused, and then started wandering down the hall. I pushed myself from room to room, passing by an older man in a sweatsuit, a couple having sex, and a rich old lady with a poodle. The fourth try was the winner; a young man with blonde hair, dressed in a sharp three piece suit. He looked like a salesman, or a maybe a high-class drug dealer.

I took him with ease, discovering he was a marketing executive with a wife and a two year old daughter, that he loved baseball, and he was allergic to peanuts. Knowing he had a child made me

hesitate to keep him, but I was in a hurry, and his meat suit was perfect for where I was headed next. I would drop him off unharmed once I was done with him.

I wasn't sure what my next move would be, but I knew I needed help, and there was only one person I could think of who might be available. I spent a few minutes getting a better feel for my new host, and then headed out of the Hotel, tracing my steps back towards the underground village where I had last seen Joe and Elyse. I walked past the alley and noticed the door I had entered was clearly visible now, though it had been chained four times over. I stifled the anger I felt at the memory, and kept walking. This time I wanted to go up.

"Can I help you, sir?"

The lobby of Madalytics was all silver, blue, and glass, with a semi-circular receptionist desk pressed against the back wall off the elevator and a massive flatscreen touting all kinds of data metrics behind the receptionist's head.

He was a scrawny man in his early twenties, with six or seven piercings in each ear, spiked blue hair, and a winning smile. It was a look, but it suited him. I glanced up at the cameras covering the area, and then returned his smile.

"I'm here to see Mr. Rutherford," I said. "I'm a college buddy. He told me I could stop by whenever I was in town."

Hearing I wasn't a customer, his formalities dropped. "Oh, cool. Yeah, sure. I think Brian's in a meeting right now, but I'll send him a message."

I closed my eyes and thanked God he was still in town and still alive. I could only guess the Nicht Creidim had more pressing concerns now than dealing with an angelic changeling.

The receptionist's phone buzzed a few seconds later, and he looked down on it, and then at me. "What was your name again?" he asked.

"Rebecca."

He raised his eyebrow at that, and then typed something into the phone. When it buzzed again, his eyes widened. I narrowed mine, prepared to have to either fight my way in, or run away.

"I'll show you to his office. He'll be with you in a minute." He put a little 'be right back' placard onto the desk and stepped out from behind it, leading me through a solid wood door to the left. The offices were open and organized, with rows of people sitting

behind rows of computers, in various stages of work and loafing. Neon arrows guided employees to the 'Spa' and the 'Nap Room', as well as 'Stuffy Stuff: Jacket Required'.

We were ignored on our trek past the workers and into a hallway, through a section of spaces that contained a gym, a ping-pong table, and a masseuse. Brian's office was all the way in the back, a huge expanse in the corner decked out much like the subterranean bar had been. I recognized the juke box.

Brian showed up before the receptionist left. He was cautious in his entrance and expression, unsure of what to expect. When he was confronted with a man, he gave the hint of a smile.

"Thanks, Pete," he said to the guy with blue hair. Pete left, and Brian walked right up to me. "Is it really you? I thought you were dead."

"Spirits are hard to kill," I replied. For all I knew, I was impossible to fully destroy in this state. Not that it mattered. Throwing me hundreds of miles away was more than effective enough to put me out of play. "I know Joe got the Deceiver. He used it on my friend and took something from us, something he can use to do a lot of damage to the world." I looked into his eyes. "Something that will either change all of mankind the way you've been changed, or kill it."

Brian was still for a moment, and then shrugged. "I don't know how I can help you with that. I told you, I'm not a fighter, and I don't even have the sword anymore. That man, Joe, he killed all of them. I only escaped because of you." He walked over to his desk, and opened one of the drawers. He placed the ward stone down in front of me. "He didn't even bother taking this. I've spent so much time staring at it, waiting for it to turn, waiting for them to come back for me."

"You'd rather live in fear than fight back?" I asked.

"I don't want to fight."

"I know, it's a choice between crappy and crappy, but I need your help. I need to stop him."

He stared at me. "I can't."

"Do you think God made you an angel so you could just tuck your wings in and hide when things didn't go your way? Do you think you were made unique to hang out in a dungeon and drink beer?" I walked up to the desk and picked up the ward stone. "If you do, you don't need this." I threw it to the ground, breaking it

into two pieces. “I’m going to kill you myself.”

He was afraid, that much was clear, but he was afraid of the wrong thing. Most of the changelings were demons. If Joe had his way, he would be even more screwed than he already was.

His face was flushing, and I thought he might either start crying, or yell back at me. Instead, he closed his eyes, reached up, and pulled off his shirt. His wings unfolded in freedom, and he lifted a few inches off the ground.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re right. The Lord didn’t make me this way to run a software company. What do you want me to do?”

I smiled, leaned over the desk, and kissed him on the cheek, causing an embarrassed blush. There were two things I needed. To find out what happened to Max, and to get a new partner, even if it was an unwilling one.

“You have a lot of nerds out there, don’t you?” I asked. “I need to get my hands on surveillance recordings for the Hotel Andra from the day we met, and the week after.”

“Easy enough. Most of the hotels downtown use the same ISP, and they stream their surveillance to offsite data centers for security.” He lowered himself to the ground, tucked his wings, and sat down at his desk. His hands were a blur along the keyboard. “I just sent an e-mail. We should have results in a couple of hours.”

“I knew you were the right person to come to.”

He glanced over at me. “I’m not certain I won’t regret this, but hiding hasn’t helped much.”

“Next request. Can any of your employees do anything with cell phones? I need to find someone’s number, and all I can give you is a starting location from a month ago.”

He lowered himself back to the ground. “I’ve got a guy working remote in Australia that can probably do it. I’ll send him an e-mail.”

He typed it out and sent it off. A few seconds later he pointed at the screen. “My contact at RainierNet is better than I expected.” He swiveled the screen so I could see. “Login credentials for the remote surveillance service the Hotel Andra uses.”

“Let’s see what we can see.”

He copied and pasted his way into the remote interface, and entered the date range I had requested. The hotel had a camera in the lobby and a few in the hallways on each floor. It was a lot of video to look through.

“Start with the lobby. Just keep going until Joe turns up,” I said.

He started pulling it up, but a notification popped up on the screen. He tabbed back to his e-mail, and then pushed the keyboard over to me. “Put in the address and the date. No promises, but he’ll do his best.”

I entered the data and he sent the reply back, then returned to the videos. He scrubbed through the lobby on the day we’d lost the Deceiver, turning up nothing until one o’clock in the morning. It wasn’t Joe that walked into the hotel lobby.

It was Elyse.

“He got her too,” I said. “She was on my side.” The camera angle was wide enough to show her going into the elevator. “Can you find the third floor cameras, around the same time?”

He complied, searching for the right clips. “Rebecca, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“How did you get lost?”

“What do you mean?”

He looked at me. “In my Source, you said you were lost. I could see it in your eyes, you didn’t just mean there. You’re lost right now too. You must be, to be a spirit.”

He wasn’t wrong, but the question made me uncomfortable. “It’s complicated.”

He laughed. “I would imagine it would have to be. Still, maybe when we have more time you can tell me about it? People tell me I’m a good listener.”

There was a part of me that wanted to spill the whole thing right then and there. To confide in someone and unleash the torrent of mixed emotions I was holding onto. “Maybe.” I winked at him.

He half-smiled and returned his attention to the screen. “Here you go,” he said.

Elyse was walking down the hallway. She stopped at Room 341 and knocked. The door opened. Obi. He said something, she said something. He looked back into the room, and then left, closing the door behind him. He followed Elyse to the elevator at a run.

“Is that your friend? What did she tell him?”

“That’s Obi, yeah. I don’t know what she said. Maybe that I was in trouble?” I had no idea, but it gotten him moving in a hurry.

Brian was ahead of me, seeking out the lobby camera. He found it fast, and we watched Elyse and Obi leave together. Two minutes later Obi came back in, with Joe right behind him.

“What are you hoping to find?” Brian asked.

“I was with two people. Joe got to Obi, but my friend Max is missing. I needed to know if he was killed, or if he got away.”

We found the third floor video. We watched Obi and Joe go in, and then Joe come back out with my pack. He glanced up at the camera just before the elevator doors closed.

“It looks like he got away.”

It did look that way, but I remembered what Max had said. Deceit and trickery. Was there any way to know if Max had planned for this to happen? I couldn’t rule it out. At least I knew he was still out there, somewhere.

The e-mail notification popped up again. Brian switched over to it.

“There’s your number,” he said.

“Do you have a cell I can borrow?” I asked.

He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. I dialed the number, trying to calm my nerves as I did. I was sure this was probably a bad idea, but I was out of alternatives.

It rang three times before it was picked up.

“Hello?”

It was the voice I had been hoping for, and dreading.

“Hello, Sarah? This is Rebecca Solen.”

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“I should have known it was you, back at the beach house,” Sarah said.

“You don’t sound surprised to hear from me,” I replied. It made me more than a little uncomfortable.

“I’m not. I knew you were out there, somewhere.”

“How?”

I heard the rush of air against her cell’s microphone, and then a new voice solved the puzzle.

“Ah, hello my sugared dumpling. I’ve been waiting for your call.”

“What the hell is going on, Max? You left Obi here as an exorcist, and me to walk right into the Nicht Creidim’s trap.”

He sighed. “It couldn’t be helped, dearest. If you had followed the plan, I wouldn’t have needed to improvise.”

As much as I didn’t like it, he was right. “Okay, but I thought the idea was to keep Sarah out of this. She can’t be trusted.”

Max started laughing. “No doubt. But then, you are the one who called her, are you not? I knew that you would, once you realized

you were low on options. Before you ask, I was lucky to get out through the window when Joe came a-calling. He has the Deceiver, Truth, the Damned, and Avriel's Box. Do you have any idea what that means?"

"He's winning?"

The laughter stopped. "Yes. A mortal is winning. Kicking our asses, actually. You're just lucky he has no idea the extent of what he possesses. I know what Joe's plan is for the Box. All he would need is to get his hands on the Destroyer and he would be able to make it happen. I'm not happy about any of this, but seeing as how we're in dire straits, the best thing we could do is add an element of uncertainty to the endeavor. You knew that the moment you started dialing."

He meant Sarah. There was no guarantee she could have all of that power thrown in her face without breaking bad again, with our without her consent.

"The Destroyer?" I asked. It was the one blade left unaccounted for. "Do you know where it is?"

"Yes. Shanghai, China. We can't risk making a move for it until we've gotten the other swords back. I need you to collect Obi-wan and get a flight to Japan. We'll meet you here."

I glanced up at Brian, who was listening to the conversation as best he could. "How am I going to get Obi? Finding a mortal body that's stronger than his won't exactly be easy."

"My apologies, apple tart, but you created this, which makes him your responsibility. I trust you'll find a way to fix it. Be here by this time tomorrow, for all of our sakes."

He hung up.

"Bad news?" Brian asked. He surprised me with the sincerity of his concern.

I kept my eyes on him while my mind ran. I couldn't take Obi on my own, but maybe I didn't have to.

"Are you still in on helping me?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "By necessity, not choice."

"I'll take it however I can get it. I need you to help me kidnap my friend, and I need a private jet that can fly us to Japan."

"At least you aren't asking for anything big."

"Brian, I-"

He put his finger to my host's lips to cut me off. "I'm kidding." He waved his hands around his office. "I have all of this because of

the grace of God. If He brought me this so that I would be able to help you when you needed aid, so be it."

It was a nice thought, but I knew that wasn't how it worked. There was no such thing as fate. Who he was, that was God's gift. What he had done with that gift was all his own. Just like what I had done as Reyka Solen was all my own. Blaming Lucifer would be a cop-out, not an absolution.

"Give me the phone," he said. I handed it to him, and he began typing on it. "I'm sending Pete a message to charter a flight to Japan. Which airport?"

"Osaka."

He nodded and kept typing. "Done. Let me grab a fresh shirt, and we'll go and get your friend."

"You really are an angel," I said.

He smirked. "Not completely. I keep picturing you as that sexy raven I saw in my soul. Not all of my thoughts are pure."

"At least you admit it. You're still human too."

"I guess so."

"Do you have a car?"

"No, do I need one?"

We were going to need some way to get Obi to the plane without being noticed. "It would help."

"I'll have Pete send a car over to the hotel." He sent him a text before he had finished talking.

I led him from his office, out to the lobby. Pete was on the phone, making final arrangements for the flight. He asked the person on the other end to hold when he saw us. "The plane will be ready at SeaTac in two hours. Are you sure though, Brian? This is going to cost, and the investors aren't going to like it."

"I know. There's nothing I can do about it. If I don't make this trip, there is no Madalytics."

"Good luck then, bro," he said, and then he resumed the call.

"How did you come up with that name, anyway?" I asked him, once we were on the elevator.

"It's based on Mary Magdalene. It was meant to be a spit in the face for my dad, without it looking too religious and scaring away the venture capitalists."

It made me laugh. "Clever."

We walked the half-mile talking about his company, about his religion, and what was most fascinating to me: his decision to go

against everything his father had stood for. There was something about that story that gave me strength and hope for the final step of my own redemption. It was my fault that Joe had taken the Box and the swords, but maybe it was meant to be? Maybe fate didn't exist, but where was the line between it and faith?

"So, what's the plan?" he asked as we stepped off the elevator on the third floor of the hotel. "I take it this friend of yours is strong like a bull?"

"More like a mammoth. He's… enhanced. He's stronger than a regular human, which is why I can't hold him like this." I didn't have time to explain about Landon, or the Beast. "He's also a former United States Marine."

"Is this supposed to be giving me confidence?"

"You're an angel, or at least part-angel. You should be able to Calm him." At least, I was hoping he could. Maybe all he had gotten were the wings.

"How do I do that?"

"You're asking me? Just tell him to relax."

We walked down the hallway, and I knocked softly on the door. I could still hear the television on the other side.

Obi answered it again, his nose wrapped in white gauze. He wasn't alone. Two Nicht Creidim flanked him from behind.

"Crap," Brian said.

"So much for calm." I shot past Obi and planted the flat of my palm into one of his keepers, hearing the bones of his nose crumble and knocking him backwards. Obi turned and tried to hit me, but I ducked underneath the blow and caught him in the lungs with a solid side-kick. Brian threw his arms around him before he could come at me again.

"Sacerdos ab Ordinario…"

The second Nicht Creidim started the exorcism. I saw Obi's gun was still on the dresser, and I lunged across the room towards it. I heard Brian behind me, speaking into Obi's ear, telling him that he needed to relax and find his center.

I felt a hand grab my ankle and send me teetering forward, still too far from the Eagle. I let go of my host and threw myself towards the exorcist, covering the distance of the small room in seconds while the marketing executive's head got twisted against the bottom of the dresser and hit the floor with a solid thud. I went in and latched on, taking in the pain of the man's memories and exulting

over it. He was a trained thug, a standard grunt, with nothing special in his past that made him anything more than fodder. The first thing I did was shut him up.

"He should have given you an Eye," I said. He might have seen me coming, and kept me from getting in.

I looked over to Brian and Obi. The angel had gone down to his knees, holding Obi's head in his lap. I guess he could Calm after all.

The first Nicht Creidim got to his feet, one hand on his nose. He tried to defend himself from me, but I had a fighter's body now, and I pushed aside his punches and returned them with force and speed. I put him back on the ground, leaving him unconscious next to the executive. I leaned down to check my former host's pulse, and cursed to find he was dead.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Maybe I shouldn't have taken him.

I went to the dresser and grabbed the Eagle. "Good work," I said to Brian.

"I didn't think that would work. Remind me never to piss you off."

I bent down and grabbed Obi's legs. "I hope the car is outside."

We carried him down the hallway towards the elevator, but I redirected Brian to the stairs. "Can you make it?" I asked.

"As long as we hurry," he replied.

The stairs emptied out into the lobby. The clerk at the front desk tried to get our attention, but we ignored him as we made our way outside. Pete hadn't let us down. A limo was waiting at the curb. I put Obi's legs down to open the back door, and then we maneuvered him in.

"What the hell is going on?" the driver asked.

"I'm Brian Rutherford, and I'm rich. If you want a nice tip, and I mean nice, you'll stop asking questions and drive."

That was all it took to get us moving. I watched the street behind us through the back of the limo. I didn't see anyone following. After a few blocks, I turned around and slumped into the seat.

"We did it," Brian said, with a huge smile on his face. "That was incredible."

"You did it. I couldn't have put Obi out like this."

He looked at the Marine, resting comfortably across the seat. "Maybe what happened to me isn't as bad as I was thinking."

“I don’t want to burst your bubble, Brian, but it’s worse than you were thinking.”

He ran his hand over his bald head and sighed. “I appreciate your honesty. It just feels good to help someone. After what happened in the underground… I feel responsible.”

“You’re going to help me stop it. All of it. That’s something you can feel good about.”

We rode in silence for a while, until Brian got on his cell to ask Pete about the flight. “Plane will be ready before we get there.”

I hadn’t been too worried about it, but I still felt a sense of relief at the news. “Great. Can I borrow the phone?”

He tossed it over to me. I dialed Sarah’s number.

“Rebecca,” she said. “What’s your situation?”

Businesslike. Cold. I shouldn’t have expected anything else. “We have Obi, and a jet chartered for a direct flight. We’ll be there in sixteen hours or so.”

“We?”

I glanced over at Brian. “I picked up a stray millionaire. You’d like him, he has wings.”

Brian’s face turned red, and he looked down towards his feet. It was cute how innocent he was.

“A human with wings?”

She didn’t know about the changelings? “Long story. Tell Max we’ll be there on schedule.”

“I will.”

She hung up.

“Who was that?” Brian asked.

“I’ll tell you on the plane. It’ll take a few hours to explain everything.”

“I’m not sure I want to know.”

“I’m sure you don’t, but I need to tell you anyway. All I ask is that you hear me out, the whole thing, before you pass judgement on anybody.”

“The only true judge is God.”

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“What do you mean, like me?” I asked.

“It is the reason you can absorb his power. You and mother both. The universe demands balance, it depends on it, as you know. The Beast was tasked with keeping that balance.”

“For the entire universe?” I was shocked. I had barely managed to keep the balance on earth in check.

“Not this universe, but yes. It’s hard to picture, but it was so.”

“What happened?”

“He failed.”

I laughed. “You mean he decided to side with chaos.”

“No. I mean, he failed. He tried to stop it and couldn’t. Everything he knew burned. I can feel the flames in his energy, the death of an untold number of planets and peoples in its ripples.”

I had no idea. I don’t know if anyone did. “Malize told me he came to this universe to hide. That he asked God for safe haven.”

“He came in goodwill. The torment of his guilt drove him mad. Now it’s all he is.”

Could I expect the same to happen to me if I failed? I’d

underestimated the costs when I'd agreed to come back from Purgatory and be a champion for mankind and the balance. Had I trapped myself in the one true hell? I took a deep breath and blew it out.

"No matter where he came from, he's a problem now," I said. "We need a plan to get Charis back."

"You can't," Clara said. "He'll know you're coming."

"So what? So he kills me again? So he kills Charis? At least we'll be back together. I'm getting her back." There was no point to any of this if it meant leaving her with Ross, to be tortured for all of eternity.

"Dad-"

"No. I don't want to hear it." I drew the revolver and held it up in front of me. "You talk about balance… what the hell am I supposed to do with this? If I understand what you're saying, it takes all three of us to capture half of his power, right? And now we have enough of it that he wants the part that you have, and he knows how to get it. What is he going to do with it, Clara? Break the balance? Then what?"

She didn't show any emotion. She just stood and looked at me, which only made me more upset.

"I see three possibilities. One, we keep the balance. Two, he breaks it. Three, we break it. What's the difference between two and three? How would us defying the universal law lead to any better outcome than him? He has Charis, and none of this makes any damn sense."

"Whoever breaks the balance has control," she said, in a tone barely above a whisper, like it was a secret she didn't want me to hear.

"Control of what?"

"Everything."

"In here? That doesn't amount to much."

"The Box is locked. Whoever has control can unlock it."

"So Ross can get out?"

"Yes."

"Or we can get out."

"Yes, except…" Her voice trailed off.

"Except what?"

She looked at the ground. "You can't break the balance before we've reached parity with him. It's impossible."

I felt like I was standing naked in the arctic. Every part of me shivered. “So, you want to stall until our power is totally equal, even if that means leaving your mother there to suffer?” I caught myself after I said it. Her mother? She wasn’t real.

“I don’t want to. We have to. It’s the only way.”

“To win? I don’t accept that. We’re going to get her.” I looked at her, feeling the chill of the coldness that washed through me. “If he’s going to capture you, I’ll kill you myself.”

She didn’t flinch. She just nodded.

“Charis is part of you,” I said. “Unless she’s with Abaddon, you can sense her. Where is she?”

“Dad, I-“

I knelt down and grabbed her shoulders. “Where is she, Clara?”

“I’ll take you,” she said. “But you’re going to die, and we’ll never get another chance at this.”

“He doesn’t have to die,” Avriel said, stepping up to us. “There may be another way.”

We both looked at him.

“Abaddon,” he said. “Convince the demon to help you. He can cloak you in his power and allow you to attack the Beast before he knows you’re there. It may be enough to save Charis, and get you the time you need to overcome him once and for all.”

“Abaddon?” I laughed weakly. “No offense, but you do know Abaddon hates me.”

“No. Abaddon hates *me* . That doesn’t mean you can’t bargain with him.”

“I think he’s already struck a deal with Ross.”

“He’s a demon. Make him a better one.”

“Even if he wants me to hand you over?”

“If that is what it takes, then so be it.”

I stared at him while I thought. The last thing I wanted to do was hand Avriel over to Abaddon again. I had enough guilt on my conscience from the first time I’d done it. “I can’t. We’ll find another way.”

“Landon,” Avriel said. “I am here for a reason. Abaddon is here for a reason. Can you be sure of what that reason is?”

I couldn’t be sure of anything.

“I’m not making any promises,” I said. “If we can’t sense him, how do we find him?”

“I have an idea where he may be. The place is always the same,

but the landscape has been remade since you arrived. Before, I called it the Grave. I could always find the demon there, kneeling before a headstone. We would talk then, before we would fight. He would tell me of his lost love."

He smirked at my surprise.

"Abaddon was a human before Lucifer changed him. I didn't know that either until we were trapped together. He killed his wife, and in time came to regret the decision."

"But he still delighted in torturing you." My mind flashed back to the image of him up on the cross, and the screams of agony that followed my betrayal. Next, I thought of Charis. I was kidding myself to think that I wouldn't hand him over without hesitation if it was the only way to get her back.

"He was always a killer, and I'm not his wife."

"Right. So, where was the Grave?"

"It was on an island. I would fly across, and he would be there."

"That isn't very helpful," I said. "We're on an island right now."

Avriel shrugged. "I'm sorry, but that was how I knew it. It wasn't a large island, and it was home to only the single headstone. It rested right in the center, a block of white marble carved in the visage of a weeping angel."

A statue of a woman alone in the center of an island? "You're telling me he's waiting at the Statue of Liberty?"

Avriel shrugged again. "I don't know that place."

I did, too well. It was where I had learned the truth about what I had agreed to do. Everything was coming full circle, and I didn't like it.

"Okay. We need to get to Liberty Island. Where are we right now?"

The shifting walls had gotten me turned around. I had a sense of where we were in space, but not geography. As much as this place looked and felt like Manhattan, there was no way to be sure that it would stay that way.

"The Chambers Street station should be right up ahead," Clara said.

"Perfect."

I started running. Clara and Avriel had no trouble keeping pace, and we covered the distance in no time. We reached Chambers Street within a few minutes. The station was deserted, the same as the rest of the city.

“Which way to Charis?” I asked.

Clara pointed north. “That way.”

The Statue was south. I hated to move further from Charis, but there was no choice. “Okay, let’s go.”

If I remembered right, it was about a mile from the World Trade complex to the Battery Park ferry, and the Chambers Street subway had only dropped us off a couple of blocks from where the Freedom Tower was rising into a sky painted with purple and black clouds, crackling with blue energy.

“Ross isn’t going to like us not moving towards him,” I said as we started running down Church Street.

“No, he isn’t,” Avriel said, pointing towards the sky. A single figure, slender and pale floated in contrast against the clouds.

“An angel?” I asked. I knew it couldn’t be so.

The figure swooped down, landing on the roof of the building ahead. Trinity Church.

My eyes followed, and when they reached ground level I drew back. The once empty city had found its populace. People, cars, dogs, and even pigeons now moved through the streets in a smooth flow, headed from one place to another. There were horns honking, voices on cell phones, laughter and shouting. I tried to find the angel again in the sudden rush.

She was gone.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Just as gathering his power makes us stronger, it also binds us closer together. As we know him better, he knows us better. He’s using your memories,” Clara said. “Or mother’s.”

I saw it now. Standing in front of a small storefront was a large man in a white apron, a smile on his face as he waited for patrons to enter his butcher shop. I’d seen that man plenty of times before, walking from the apartment in Harlem to the park where I would play. He was out of place here.

“Stay alert, Landon,” Avriel said. “He’s doing this to distract you.”

I knew it, but still found it distracting. I blinked a couple of times and starting moving again. The traffic didn’t break around us like it did in the real world. It made travel slow.

She was waiting for us outside of the church. Now that she was close, I could see what Ross had done.

“Landon.” Josette opened her arms wide to me, her round face

filled with a cheshire grin.

She was everything that was good in the world, my symbol of the best of both human and Divine. He was using her likeness to get to me, and he was succeeding.

"Not her," I said, feeling my fury building. "Anyone else, but not her."

The attack came from behind us, a flash of cloth and a glint of iron. She was the bait, not the ambush. I was barely able to turn and get my arm up in time, and I cried out in pain as the sword dug down to the bone.

He wrenched it out and stepped back, leaving us standing face to face. I knew the attacker. Charis' lover, Joseph. He drew back the blade and readied himself while blood ran down my arm and dripped on the pavement.

"A poor excuse for a replacement in her bed," he said, spitting at my feet. "You don't deserve her."

Behind me, I heard the sound of steel against steel.

"Avriel the Just," Josette said, laughing. "Just what?"

Even if I could have looked, I didn't want to. Josette deserved to be remembered in the way she lived and died; with dignity and grace.

"I don't have time for this," I said. I could feel the blood pumping through me, my anger at full-tilt. The crowd was a distraction. Josette was a distraction. Joseph was a distraction.

I was angry, but not stupid.

I pulled the gun from my waist. I didn't shoot it. I didn't need to. I threw myself towards Joseph, holding the pistol against my palm to use it as a shield. He smiled and quick stepped towards me, bringing his body perpendicular and his blade through with an amazing grace.

Ross was using Charis' memories, but I had them, too. I knew the move was coming and I ducked under it with only centimeters to spare. In one smooth motion I turned and tossed the revolver into the air, and then launched it forward. Not at Joseph, at Clara.

Until the last moment it looked like it would hit her, but I wasn't aiming for her. When that last moment came, a streak of mottled brown fur wrapped Clara up in a pair of massive paws, and bent its legs to spring away. One moment wasn't enough time, and the iron smashed into its head at mach four, the force of the crack echoing like a massive thunderclap, and the head snapping with such force

that the neck was severed from the spine. The fake Ulnyx dropped Clara while I focused, pulling the gun back to me, using it like Mjolnir and flinging it towards Joseph. He tried to sneak in on me again, but he couldn't. I knew everything he would do because Charis had spent hours training with him. The gun broke his sword hand to pieces.

I could still hear Avriel squaring off against Josette, their blades skittering and cracking against one another. I still didn't want to look, and I knew she was the one false face that I couldn't bring myself to harm. "Avriel, end it," I said. I used my power to break her blade apart. I felt sick when I heard his weapon sink into her.

"Are you okay?" I asked Clara. She was looking down on the Great Were. It was clear she had aged again, her baby fat receded and her dangerously delicate beauty rising to the surface. I could see parts of me in her eyes and face, but her appearance was more Charis.

"We need to move faster," she said.

We couldn't move faster through these crowds. Wasn't that the point? I returned the gun to my pants and wrapped my good arm around Clara's waist. I had been able to use Ross' power to fly in Purgatory. What was keeping me from doing the same here?

"Dad, don't. You're going to weaken yourself."

"I have to." I pulled in the power, focusing on bending this universe to my will. Ripples of energy cracked the world around me, and I launched into the air.

Lady Liberty was easy to spot from altitude, and I only wasted a single heartbeat to ensure the archangel had followed my lead. I took a deep breath to steel myself against the demon's innate power, and then spun in the sky and rocketed towards the Statue.

I could see him before I landed, the dark tendrils of his power trailing out around him like the train of a massive cloak. He was there as Avriel had said, on his knees at the base of the pedestal. I came to ground a thousand feet back, out of the reach of his dark essence. Avriel landed next to me.

"You two wait here," I said. I turned to Avriel. "Do your job, and protect her."

I started walking towards the demon, trying to ignore the pain in my arm and the sudden feeling of exhaustion that was pulling on me. Convincing Abaddon to help me was the only option, because there was no way he wouldn't destroy me in my current state.

“Abaddon.” I got as close to him as I could before the reach of his energy threatened to cause me to collapse.

The demon didn’t move.

“Abaddon.”

He bent down in prostration, and then rose to his feet. The swirling despair that surrounded him was sucked in as he turned, until he stood before me as only a man. His hair was short and white, his skin dark and aged. He wore a heavy wool trench coat above a black tuxedo, leaving him dark and foreboding even without the essence swirling around him. Ruby red eyes pierced the darkness and dove deep into me. When he smiled, his fanged teeth were pleasant instead of predatory.

“Diuscrucis. Have you considered what we discussed, the last time we spoke?”

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“I’m still not sure I understand everything,” Brian said as we taxied towards a small hanger at Senmon Daiten. “I mean, I get why you’re so desperate to get your hands on this Box, but…” He stared out the window at nothing. “There’s so much that’s happening here, and nobody knows about it.”

“You know about it. The question is, what are you going to do?”

He kept looking out the window. “It’s a lot to take in, Rebecca. All of this has been a lot to take in, and this is supersonic unbelievable. If I hadn’t grown wings, I’d never think it was even possible.” He turned his head to look at me, seated across from him in the small jet. “I already said I would help you, before I even understood why. If you’re afraid that’s changed because of what you were, and what you’ve done… it hasn’t. It’s up to God to decide what happens to you, not me.”

I’d been waiting for him to pass his judgement on me, despite what he had said. I was surprised to find myself relieved when he proved true to his word. “Thank you, Brian.” It was a simple thing, and all I had to offer, but it seemed to be enough.

They were waiting for us inside the hanger. I saw them from the small window over the wing. Max, waving at the aircraft with a huge smile on his face. Sarah, calm and emotionless. Ulnyx, looking like a bodyguard in a black suit and standing with his arms folded across his broad chest.

“He’s bigger than I imagined,” Brian said.

“You haven’t seen him shift yet.”

The plane rolled to a stop. The stewardess opened the door and dropped the ladder. I got up and went to the rear seat, where we had bound and gagged Obi. He’d slept most of the trip, but as soon as he’d woken up his efforts to exorcise me had resumed. I was unknotting the nylon rope the stewardess had found in an emergency toolkit when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Rebecca. I’ll take care of him.” I looked up to see Sarah standing there. She had spoken to me without emotion, but I could see the concern for Obi on her face.

Max came up the ladder as I moved aside to let her pass.

“Ah, there you are my tasty raspberry tart. Oh, and in a man now, I see. Hmm… Brother Shane, if I’m not mistaken.” He put his arms around me and squeezed.

“How did you know his name?” I asked.

“I know the names of all of my enemies.” He let me go and turned to Brian. “And the white knight himself. Your assistance has been invaluable. I’m sorry about your friends, but we’ll do our best to make things right.”

“Obi.” I heard Sarah behind me. “Obi, it’s me, Sarah.”

He didn’t respond.

“Open your eyes.”

I didn’t see his eyes open, but I heard him begin to speak. She must have taken the tape off his mouth.

“Sarah-“ I started to turn, to get her out of the way and put the tape back on.

Max took hold of my wrists. “Wait.”

“Obi, shhhh.” Sarah put her hand to his mouth and he quieted immediately, following her Command. It seemed even the power of the Deceiver could be overruled. “I want you to remember what happened. I want you to remember the truth.”

The glazed look in his eyes vanished. He stared straight ahead for a moment, and then he looked at her.

“Sarah? What are you doing here?” His eyes passed her, falling

on Max. “What’s going on?”

“The Deceiver,” Max said. “The Nicht Creidim used it on you.”

“Oh. Crap.” He lifted his hand to his forehead. “I didn’t do anything stupid, did I?”

“You tried to exorcise me,” I said.

I should have expected he would laugh. “They could have convinced me of anything, and that’s what they chose? I might have done that willingly.”

“They also made you hand over to box.”

He stopped laughing. “Right. They would do that, wouldn’t they. It looks like we’re in an airplane. Where are we?”

“Japan,” Sarah said. “Osaka.”

“The Nicht Creidim have the Deceiver, the Damned, Truth, and the Box,” I said. “We’re here to get it all back.”

Obi stretched and got to his feet. “So what are we waiting for? You have my Eagle?”

“Up front,” I said.

“We aren’t here to get it back,” Max said.

My head whipped around. “What?”

“You’re here to get it back. You and Sarah. You’re the only ones who can, but I think you already knew that.”

I had considered it. I looked over at her. “You’re okay with this?”

“No, but we don’t have a choice. I want Landon back too. I’ll let you in.”

“Wonderful,” Max said, clapping his hands together. “Now, if you ladies don’t mind, we’re on a bit of a tight schedule.”

“So what’s the plan?” I asked.

“Ditch your current host, and I’ll let you hitch a ride. Ulnyx will drive us to the docks. After that, we improvise.” Sarah lifted the leg of her pants as she spoke, revealing a cursed and blessed dagger riding on her calf. “I’m not much of a fighter, but I know you are.”

“None of the swords will work on you or Sarah. Between her power, and your experience, it should be like a walk in the park.”

I was sure it wouldn’t be that easy. Joe was guaranteed to have tricks up his sleeve that none of us knew about. “What are you going to do?”

“We’ll wait for you here. Once you get back, we’ll need to get airborne and go claim the Destroyer.” The demon put his hand on Brian’s shoulder. “If you wouldn’t mind?”

“I’m in,” Brian replied. “I’ll go talk to the pilot.”

“What the heck am I supposed to do?” Obi asked. “You woke me up just to leave me twiddling my thumbs again?”

“We couldn’t exactly leave you spouting latin every time you were conscious,” Max said. “If you’re itching to get involved, you can ride shotgun with the fur ball.”

“Not my first choice, but it beats hanging out here.”

“Very well. You three better get moving. Be back with the Box in two hours, or I’m afraid the end of the world as we know it will come sooner than we’d like.”

Everything was happening so fast. I glanced at Sarah. “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

I let go of Brother Shane, feeling myself spread away from his soul and exit his body. Max grabbed him before he could collapse, holding him in a tight grip. I didn’t want to know what he would do with him.

An instant later, I was trying to wrap myself around Sarah’s soul. I could feel the resistance, the energy roiling around me like a massive lightning storm, and I could hear Max telling her to relax. I pushed into the storm even as it rolled, trying to navigate my way through, trying to complete the connection.

When I did, it hurt. Not like the others, where the pain was intense but manageable. It hurt more than any hurt I had ever experienced, or any hurt I could have possibly conceived. It was as if I had been shattered into a million tiny fragments, and each of those shards had been stabbed with a white hot sun. There was nothing to compare it to, and no way to get around it. I was forced to ride through the whirlpool, to hold on while I was pulled through the broken mess that was at the heart of the true diuscrucis. They always went mad eventually, I knew, but to see it, to feel it, to have it run through me… once I had come out the other side, it was all I could do to hold myself together.

How Sarah was managing defied my understanding.

“*Are you with me?* ” Sarah asked.

I was with her, but she was still in control. “*Yes. Sarah, I-* “

“*Do you remember our conversation on the beach?* ”

“*Yes.* ”

“*Let’s just leave it at that, okay, Rebecca? I’m trying to forgive you, because I know it’s what my mother would want, and what Landon*

would want. It's not easy, after everything that happened, that you helped to cause. "

"*I'm sorry. "* I had to say it. She didn't reply.

"We're ready," Sarah said to Max. "Obi, let's go."

He had retrieved his gun and was standing by the ladder. "I'm waiting on you, kiddo," he said.

We followed him out of the airplane and down to where Ulnyx was waiting.

"The other meat," he said with a laugh. "I'm impressed to see you're still alive."

"These are silver bullets, man," Obi replied, tapping the gun at his hip. The Were just kept laughing.

"Ulnyx, we're ready," Sarah said.

"She's in there?"

"Yes."

He stared into our eyes. "I owe you one for saving my ass." He waved towards the back of the hanger. "The car's out back. Well, it's more like a truck. We don't want to be too suspicious."

We followed him out the back door. When he had said truck, he had meant truck. An eighteen wheeler was parked there, a black big-rig with Japanese lettering running along the side, hooked up to a trailer painted with cartoon characters.

"You get the VIP seat in the back," Ulnyx said, pointing to the rear of the trailer. "Meat and I will be in the cab."

"Seriously, man," Obi said. "Stop calling me that."

I could still hear him laughing as we climbed into the empty trailer and pulled down the door.

"*Just you and me* ," I said. "*It would help if I could try your body on, to get used to it before we get there."*

The floor shifted below us as the truck roared to life. A moment later I could feel us start moving.

"*Okay. I'll give you a few minutes. "*

Give me? Before I could ask what she meant, I found myself in her skin. I stumbled forward, getting my bearings, and then straightened up. Sarah was young, and she had kept herself in good shape. She wasn't Elyse, but she was much closer to my size than Brother Shane had been. I crouched down and grabbed one of the daggers from her calf. In one quick motion, I hurled it forward, smiling when it stuck into the wall of the trailer. I'd been too long without a decent host, and I'd missed it.

"*That's enough,* " Sarah said. I was kicked out without warning. It left me disoriented and angry.

"*What the hell?* " I was the spirit. I was supposed to be in control.

"*Not here,* " Sarah said, leaving me to wonder if she could sense my thoughts. "*I decide when you get to come out and play.* "

It was possible to join with her, but not without complications. At least I hadn't tried to take her back at the beach house.

"*Your soul is a mess,* " I said. Just thinking about what I had experienced made me feel cold.

"*Tell me about it.* "

The truck started vibrating and shifting as we got away from the airport and out onto the highway. Sarah and I sat in silence, and in time I began to count the rivets that held the trailer together.

"Rebecca?" Sarah whispered my name out loud, as if she was trying to say it without spitting, or cursing.

"*Yes?* "

"Max told me what happened to you. He told me that you've changed. Is it true?"

I remembered the look in Obi's eyes at the train station. I remembered his words. "*I'm not sure. I'm trying to.* "

"Do you feel God?"

The question took me by surprise. "*I believe in His redemption. I believe in His forgiveness.* "

"You don't believe you deserve it."

It was a one, two punch.

"*I don't know how to win without creating chaos around me.* " I don't know why I was telling her that. Maybe it was the strangeness of my bond to her, the incompleteness. "*On the beach, you said to just do my best. I am, but it's not good enough. Maybe they're right? Maybe I am what I am, and that's all I can ever be.* "

She'd opened the floodgates, and every doubt I'd had too much time to think about while I was floating back to shore was surfacing.

"Or maybe you need to stop listening to the chatter, and pay attention to your most honest self."

"*I have. I want to go to Heaven, and I'm willing to do whatever I have to in order to get there. I want to help Landon, but I also want to help myself. It doesn't sound very selfless, does it?* "

Sarah laughed out loud. "No, but then I don't know of a single being that isn't motivated at all by what they want for themselves."

“*What about you?* ”

“What about me?”

“*What do you want?* ”

“To live up to the memory of my mother, most of all. She was a strong person, and a stronger angel. She didn’t sacrifice her beliefs for anything. You’ve seen my soul, Rebecca. I don’t know if I can fight the turmoil inside forever, but I hope if the time comes that I can’t, I’ll have the grace to do the right thing before I hurt anyone.”

There were a few minutes of silence while I thought about what she had said.

“*Landon was pretty selfless, to throw himself into the middle of the Divine for the sake of everyone else* ,” I said at last.

“I think if you ask him, he won’t tell you it was selfless.”

“*I hope I get to ask him.* ”

“Me too.”

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We spotted the first Nicht Creidim laying prone on top of a warehouse two blocks from their main facility. Ulnyx had pounced on him from behind, removed his head, and then thrown the sniper rifle he'd been toting down to Sarah and me. We'd left the truck a few blocks back, and hadn't intended for him or Obi to leave the vehicle behind, but he'd smelled the cleaning agents they used on their guns at a distance and decided we would need backup until we got a little closer.

I was grateful for the Were's sense of smell when Obi took out a second sniper inside the opposite building.

I knew from Elyse that the sentries wore remotely tracked heart monitors. They knew the moment their people died, and in this case their response was to start blaring an exorcism through hidden loudspeakers.

"We need to shut that up," I said, expecting to start being peeled away, and tightening my grip on Sarah's soul.

"I'm in control, remember? I don't want you to go." It felt as though her soul reached out and took hold of me, steadying my

force inside of her. The loudspeakers continued, but I remained planted.

"That crap is hurting my ears," Ulnyx said, leaping down from the building and landing at our side. He had his hands pressed against his head.

"Why don't you go shut it up?" Sarah asked.

"It doesn't look like I'll have a chance." He pointed forward with a massive claw. We looked just in time to see a black clothed figure disappear behind a building. "They're pretty well-armed. We'll clear a path for you." He raised his nose to the air, and looked to the building where we'd last seen Obi. "Hey, meat," he shouted. "You see that?"

The response was a loud boom from the high-powered rifle.

"I smell blood," the Were said.

"*Sarah, warn him about Wolfsbane* ." Joe had taken the pack, which meant he'd recovered the knife.

"Ulnyx, be careful. Rebecca says they have something called Wolfsbane."

He growled at that, but launched forward. Another rifle shot sounded out past the din of the exorcism.

"You're up Rebecca," Sarah said. "I'm a sitting duck out here."

I was in control of her faculties a moment later.

"*Don't get me shot.* "

"I'll do my best." I ducked in a shady corner of a warehouse and kept my ears open. The noise levels rose with an explosion of gunfire, howling, and screaming. I took that as my queue to start moving forward.

I ran a block and peered around the corner. A black-clothed body lay on the ground, a pool of blood around him, running from a single gunshot wound to the head. I thanked Obi silently and raced across the expanse without drawing any fire. The next block was just as clear, and I kept moving until I was right on top of the continuing sounds of battle.

I found Ulnyx pinned down behind a cement truck, his body running with blood from a dozen wounds. Six Nicht Creidim kept up concerted fire from the corner of a warehouse. Of course the Were could smell us, and he looked over and waved us on. We snuck across the space without drawing attention.

"*We should help him* ," Sarah said.

"*Not our mission,* " I replied. "*He volunteered for this.* "

Our target was only a block away. The roll-up door was down, and I was sure they were just waiting for someone to come and try to open it. Had they identified Sarah already? Did they know I was with her? The Eye didn't work through cameras.

We reached our last hiding spot, and I stared at the door. "*That's the only way in, "* I said. "*You can bet Joe's got an ambush all set for us. "*

"*We don't have a choice ,*" Sarah said. "*You're supposed to be good. "*

I took the daggers from her leg. "What if they shoot you before the door opens?"

A bullet answered my question, a loud blast that couldn't have come from more than a dozen feet away and up. A body fell from a far window.

I ran as fast as I could. To the normal observer, the door didn't look like it could be opened from the outside. Elyse had known how to get in, and I had retained that information. I just had to hope Joe didn't know spirits could take memories from their hosts.

I crouched at the door, slamming my fist on the ground at its base. A small, seamless panel opened up, revealing a keypad underneath. I was about to type in the code when I had a better idea.

"Let me go. I'll clear the inside. The code is 947468," I said. "Remember it. 947468. Wait twenty seconds and then put it in."

Her response was to throw me from her at a speed that surprised me. I flowed through the heavily runed steel and concrete, and into the room. There were four Nicht Creidim there, with golden Eyes tattooed to their foreheads. They all looked towards me, able to see whatever it was I actually looked like. One of them started chanting.

A stupid idea, I realized too late. I should have guessed they would be more prepared for me, but I had hoped they would have thought the loudspeakers had done the trick. Joe wasn't taking any chances.

Then the door started rolling up, which took all of us by surprise. The exorcist kept going for another couple of seconds, until a hand appeared under the rising door, a dark hand holding a cannon. The bullet tore into his stomach and shut him up forever.

Sarah came in next, rolling under the small space. I urged myself toward her while she threw herself at one of the defenders, her

knife work decent but not good enough to keep herself alive for very long. She didn't need a knife though, she just needed to keep them off-balance.

"Stop," she Commanded. Two of them froze immediately. The other squinted his eyes, fought off the power, and charged.

I grabbed onto her soul. It hurt again, but not as much as the first time. I could feel the power of it, the energy churning and twisting and reveling in the control. It was less painful, but it was more frightening. Using the power to Command was accepting the demonic side of her, the chaos and the evil that threatened to unravel her.

I didn't need to ask for the wheel. Her eyes became my eyes, and I brought a dagger up just in time to push back against an incoming attack, their weapon skidding off my own. He backed away and pulled a gun instead, but Obi had gained enough clearance to get in. His shot came first and left us with no one to fight.

"It's not safe for you here," I said to him.

"You're welcome," he replied. "You're lucky I guessed what you were going to try to do. Jumping from that window wasn't fun."

"What do you see?" I asked, looking around. I knew we were in a warehouse. I could see it through the haze of energy that was left by the Deceiver.

"A warehouse," he said. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

He'd changed something, I could see that much. I figured out what just in time.

I threw myself at Obi, catching him in the chest and throwing him out of the building just in time to save his life. There were shooters clinging to the scaffolding, hiding behind boxes and taking aim. Joe had disguised them, made them invisible, which meant I was the only one who could see them.

I was laying on top of him, looking down at his surprised and angry face. "Snipers. Joe's hiding them. Thank you for your help, but you can't help me anymore. You need to stay out here." I put my hand on the Eagle. "I need to borrow this."

I pulled it from his grasp, rolled off and charged back in. I kept moving at a random pace and in alternating directions towards the elevator I knew was there. Bullets ricocheted off the stone floor and scaffolding around me, one coming close enough that I felt it burn through a wisp of Sarah's short hair. I returned fire, conserving bullets and taking shots only when I could see them hanging out of

the corners. With this much movement my aim was crap, but it was enough to keep them on their toes.

We reached the elevator. I hit the button and then dove back under the cover of a few crates. The gunfire stopped, but I could hear clanging as they moved around, trying to shift into a better position to kill me before I could get into the underground. I had no doubt that it would be just as hairy down there, but at least there wasn't enough space for long-range combat.

The elevator reached the top and the doors slid open. It was empty. I took a deep breath. "*If anything happens, I'm sorry,* " I said to Sarah. I couldn't be sure the snipers wouldn't hit us. There was only one place to go.

I started running, and then dove and twisted, landing hard on my ass and sliding the last few feet into the elevator while shooting randomly into the warehouse. I heard the shots echo through the open expanse, and I waited to feel the burning sting of a bullet ending Sarah's life. Pings sounded around me, four of them, and then the doors slid closed. Three more pings told me they had kept shooting, but even the elevator was fortified.

"*We made it* ," Sarah said.

"*So far so good. Your turn. If there's anyone waiting at the elevator, you need to stop them.* "

I went from actor to observer. The energy swirling around Sarah's soul was exhilarating and terrifying. She was letting go of the facade of control she worked so hard to maintain. She was walking into potential death, and her will was responding to prevent it.

The Nicht Creidim stronghold was deep underground, so the ride was long. It felt a million times longer. By the time we stopped descending, Sarah was burning with cold fire. I was a moth held tight against it, unable to flee and mesmerized by its beauty.

We crouched in the forward corner of the elevator while the door slid open. I could sense the power of the Deceiver, and see into the illusion. A single large room, with no other way in or out. Two Nicht Creidim held their weapons ready to fire as soon as we appeared.

"Kill him," Sarah said, the energy of her soul discharging like a solar flare. She hadn't targeted either of them, so they both followed the Command. Two gunshots, two thuds.

Sarah smiled.

“Where do we go?” she asked.

“You can’t see it. Let me drive.”

“Tell me where.” Her voice was empty, emotionless.

“Sarah. Let me in. Landon needs us.”

It broke her out of it. I was back in control. I scooped up one of the guns on my way down the hallway. I knew there was a lab down here, and I tried to remember how to get there.

I made a left, and then a right, and then ran down a long hallway. In time I realized that I knew where I was heading. The lab was near where they stored the artifacts. I had to pass Elyse’s room to get there.

Was she still alive? I was fairly sure Joe wouldn’t have killed her, despite what he had done to her sister. She was his favorite, his pride and joy, and in a twist of irony he had too much respect for her stubbornly strong will to put her down with such disregard.

I stopped at her door and considered opening it. I don’t know why I was so concerned about her. I was wasting time checking and putting Sarah at greater risk. It was stupid, and foolish.

I did it anyway.

Her room was just as it had been the first time I’d visited. It was peaceful, serene, with soft music trickling from the walls. It was such a stark contrast to the chaos I had come through that it made me shiver. She was there in yoga pants and a sports bra, whirling and kicking and grunting, sweat running from her pores. When she saw me, she stopped and stared.

He hadn’t killed her, but he had disfigured her. The Eye had been removed, cut away so that all that remained was a mess of scar tissue, a red splotch of mangled flesh that screamed out for attention and stole so much from the beauty of her heritage.

“Sarah?” She was breathing hard, and I saw her eyes flick over to where a wooden sword rested on her mat.

I didn’t waste time on pleasantries. “Rebecca,” I said. “Are you still in?”

She licked her lips, and smiled. “Did you kill Joe yet?”

I shook my head.

“Good. I owe that son of a bitch.”

She walked over to the edge of the mat and lifted it up, pulling the black stone from under it.

“I hid this from him, after he captured me. First in my mouth and then… in other places. He beat me more than once asking what

had happened to it." Her devious look almost made me blush. The stone was replaced with the obsidian spatha. "Let's go."

We went back into the hallway. It was still clear. We moved at a brisk walk while listening for incoming enemies.

"I didn't think you could bond with Sarah," she said.

"It's complicated," I replied.

We kept moving, but there was nothing. No resistance. Had Joe not expected that anyone would get this far? After all, I was supposed to be exorcised, and who else could have gotten past the warehouse and the elevator?

We were nearing the armory when we heard the first boot steps. They were running, coming on fast and in large numbers. There were too many to fight in the open like this.

"Here," Elyse said. She grabbed Sarah's hand and pushed on a panel on the wall, opening the door to another apartment. "This used to be Rae's."

She swung me inside and closed the door, jamming the end of the blade into the seam so it wouldn't seal completely. We both put our faces to the crack and watched two dozen of them run by.

"We'll wait a minute, and then take them by surprise. Joe sent his youngest… how many have you killed?"

"Personally? None, but I didn't come alone. A dozen, give or take."

She looked shocked and confused. "I don't understand that. He wouldn't have sent those children after you unless he had no other choice. He'd know they'd be running into their death."

We waited and listened. At first, it was quiet, and then the soldiers returned. Each of them was armed with a blessed sword. Ulnyx? Or had Max decided to get involved? Whichever it was, they passed us by and headed back the way they'd come.

"We need to hurry," Elyse said, opening the door again. We ran hard down the corridor, past the armory and down another long hall. We nearly fell over when the entire complex shook.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"The lab is just around the corner. Let's get the Box and get out of here."

We reached another steel door, painted in runes. Elyse put her hand to the biometric lock. The door started to open.

"Just like Joe to be so arrogant," she said.

The walls shook again, and I could swear I heard screaming

from somewhere inside the compound.

We ducked under the door before it finished opening, and moved into the lab. It was a large room, filled with standing tables, desks, computers, and a lot of large off-white devices whose purposes I couldn't fathom. To each side was a column of thick glass where even more equipment had been assembled to run different tests. In the center of the room on the right, seemingly floating in mid-air, was Avriel's Box.

"There you are," I said.

"Here I am." Joe stepped out from the room on the left, Deceiver in one hand and Truth in the other. He looked haggard and worn. "I underestimated you. I didn't think you'd come up with a combo that could get past my defenses."

"I'm resourceful like that," I said.

"If you mean the way cockroaches are resourceful, then I guess you're right." He waved Truth towards the Box. "I suppose you came for that?"

"And the swords. Where is the Damned?"

"That one isn't very useful to me. I put it in the stone, where the Redeemer used to be." He shrugged his shoulders. "I figured the swords had something to do with the Box, seeing as how you were collecting them. I had my best people on it. They couldn't work it out, so I sent a team out to capture that Hell reject, Alichino. They haven't gotten back yet, but it doesn't matter now."

The room shook again, as if to emphasize his defeated point.

"What's happening?" I asked.

He took the blades and turned them in his hands, offering me the hilts. "Take the swords. Take the Box. It won't save you. It won't save any of us. We've survived by being smart, by staying out of the spotlight. I thought I could kill all of the Divine with that thing. I thought I could save humanity from you. I thought I was being smart, but I wasn't."

"What are you talking about?" I was getting angry.

Joe's laugh was weak. "I drew too much attention." The building shook again. "I knew you were going to come, Rebecca. I knew I could handle you. We tried touching the Deceiver to the Box this morning. We were afraid to before, but we were getting desperate. The power…" The door to the lab had closed behind us, but now it began to groan. "The power is unbelievable. Just from one of the blades. With all six…" His eyes narrowed. "I don't know what

you're going to do with all six, but whoever gets them and puts them to the Box will have the power to change the entire universe. I believe that."

I was starting to feel warm. I turned my head to the door, and saw that the center was beginning to glow with heat. What the hell was happening?

"It has to be better in your hands than in his," Joe said. "I'm an old man. I can't win this fight. Take the swords."

Elyse pocketed the obsidian blade, reached out, and took them. Joe smiled.

"You're the pride of the family," he said. "I love you."

He knew what she was going to do. He didn't even flinch when she stabbed him.

"I love you too, father," she said.

The door behind us was getting too hot for comfort. I grabbed Elyse's elbow and pulled her away, towards the back of the room.

Whatever was melting the steel was powerful enough to convince Joe to surrender.

Whatever was melting the steel was ignoring the runes.

Whatever was melting the steel wanted the Box, and we were the only thing standing in its way.

We were pressed against the rear of the room. The center of the door had liquified, and now ran away in a fit of smoke that obscured our view.

"*Time for you to leave,* " Sarah said. I was thrown from her body and into Elyse's. She didn't resist me. She knew I was a better fighter.

The smoke started to dissipate. A figure stepped through. It all began to make sense.

Izak.

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“The last time we spoke?” I raised my eyebrows. The last time we had spoken had been only hours before I’d gone into the Box. How could this shade of the demon know about that?

“On the top of the mountain, at the temple,” he said. “Ah, I see you’re surprised. The universe is filled with things you don’t understand. I have lived for over a thousand years, and even I am still in awe of it at times.”

“So, you know what’s happening outside of this place?” I asked, turning my head and glancing back at Avriel.

He laughed. “Not in so much detail. The senses are clouded. I hold the memories of thought and word. I remember our battle.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “It has been so long since I’ve felt a touch, even one made in violence. I was mortal once, did you know that?”

I nodded. “Avriel told me that you two speak sometimes.”

“Yes. I despise that seraph with every spark of fire that burns in my heart and soul, and yet even in that hate I find myself overwhelmed with loneliness. For all the power given to me by

Lucifer, his trap is that he damned me to a hell all the same."

I could't imagine being him. For as difficult and painful as the mantle of diuscrucis had been, at least I could love and be loved. At least not everything I drew near was destined to die.

"You asked me where I saw myself in ten thousand years," I said. "You asked me why I was working so hard to save mankind." I hadn't given it much thought. I had been too busy acting on instinct, following my gut and my heart into the rabbit hole. "I can't help but think about the people I've known. The sacrifices they've made. Josette spent seven hundred years fighting for the goodness of God's creations. You've spent over a thousand years fighting to tear them down."

"And for what, child?" Abaddon asked. "What have I achieved? What did she achieve?"

"Nothing." It had to be that way. It was my job to make it so. That wasn't the point. I looked up at the Statue behind him. "That never stopped her. It never would have stopped you."

"It is what I was made to do. Yet, I have become tired of it."

"Have you?" I asked. "If you remember then tell me, why did you run?"

He recoiled as though I had used the revolver on him.

"What?"

"Why did you run? I had the Deliverer to your neck. It could have been over for you, but you took off."

His face darkened. I realized I needed to be more careful. I wanted him to help me, and pissing him off wasn't the way to do it. He turned his back to me, and fell to his knees once more.

"Where do we go when we die, diuscrucis?" he said. "Heaven, Hell, Purgatory. These are places, destinations. A continuation of the path we travel from the moment our soul catches its first spark of life. You and I have made that journey, but tell me, child, what comes after?"

I took a few steps towards him. He didn't react. "I don't know," I said.

His laughter was deep and full of sorrow. "You don't know… Neither do I. For one as old as I am, the idea of the unknown is more frightening than the idea of being trapped." He raised his hand to his lips, kissed it, and waved it out towards the Statue. Then he rose and faced me again. "You should appreciate the sentiment. It is a balance… between my hatred of being, and my

fear of not being. The Beast promises to end all of that. Here, and out there. All I need to do is help to set him free. You weren't supposed to follow me." He looked back at Clara. She was still standing with Avriel, her hands on her hips and her expression impatient.

"I won't let you touch her," I said.

"Do you really think you can stop me? You aren't even armed."

"I have the Beast's power. I don't need a weapon." It was a bit of a bluff. I had no idea how to fight him with it.

"You don't know how to use it against me. Oh, you've done well so far, but this is a large step to take."

His essence began to ooze out around him, a semi-solid mess of darkness that formed an intricate pattern at his back.

"Wait. I don't want to fight you. That isn't why I came."

He seemed surprised. "No? Then why bring the seraph?"

"I know you can hide yourself from Ross. I know you can hide others."

He laughed again, a deep booming sound of wisdom and years. "What can you offer me, diuscrucis?"

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. I had nothing to bargain with.

"Well?" His power continued to spread, moving out to the sides to slowly encircle me, but leaving me a clear path and a clear head.

"An end," I said, the idea coming to me in desperation. "A true end. You can't trust Ross to do as he says. You can't trust him not to enslave you when this is over. You've said I have your respect - I ask you to trust in my word. If you help me against him, I'll put an end to your existence. I'll find a way."

My heart pounded while he considered. Every second of silence only made me feel more vulnerable. Finally, he nodded.

"Here is our deal, diuscrucis. I will guide you to the Beast, but you must walk my path, and it is on you and yours to survive. It is not an easy path, and I will not help you. If you aren't strong enough to walk it you will never be strong enough to defeat him, or end me. When you defeat him you will have the power to end me here, and I know you will do it. How you will keep your promise out there… not with a blade, for I will not go willingly despite my desire. Do you understand?"

I'd made so many promises I wasn't sure I could keep. What was one more? "I understand."

“Promise in blood.”

He took three steps towards me, a dagger appearing in his hand. He cut his palm and offered me the blade.

I took it from him, the coldness of it seeping deep into me. I made a quick stroke, and he clasped his hand in mine.

“It has been too long,” he said, holding my hand tight while our blood mixed. I felt the immensity of the bargain clamp down on me. It filled me with a cold dread at what I might one day be forced to do.

I had to pull my hand away. For all of the demon’s strength and power, he was so alone that he didn’t want to let go.

“It is done,” Abaddon said. “Gather your child and her keeper, and we will go.”

I walked away from him, back to where Clara and Avriel were waiting.

“Well?” she asked. “I saw you shake his hand, that has to be a good thing?” She looked older again; almost the age I had been when age had stopped having meaning.

“I don’t know if it’s a good thing, but he’ll take us. He said we have to walk his path, and it won’t be easy.” I looked at Avriel. “Do you know what that means?”

“No.”

“He also said he remembers everything that happened to him once he was out,” I said, staring into the angel’s eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Avriel stared back at me, his lips moving in silence before his mind caught up to them. “What is there to say? I know what you did to me out there. I also know I forgave you. Is this a guilt that you desire to carry with you for the rest of your existence?”

“But… the Beast?” He had destroyed the angel as completely as anything could be destroyed.

“I am a shadow of the seraph known as Avriel. I felt the loss as sharply as anything can be felt here. When you have control of this place, you can finish what he started and let me be at peace forever.”

“Do you think that after this, there is peace?” It was in stark contrast to what Abaddon must believe to be so afraid of it.

He nodded. “I believe it. What comes next is as much a matter of faith as what comes before.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It is over. I was left here to protect your child and to help you defeat the Beast. That is my purpose now. It is all that I desire. If you want to feel the forgiveness that you will not claim otherwise, let me do as I have been willed.”

I bit my lower lip and nodded. “Abaddon is waiting for us.”

Avriel’s eyes narrowed when he looked out to where he stood wrapped in darkness. “Don’t forget he is a demon. He can’t be trusted.”

“I’m counting on you to keep a close eye on him,” I said. “You know him better than anyone.”

A sword materialized in the angel’s hand. “As you say.”

The three of us walked over to where he was standing. We were halfway to him when Clara put her hand in mine and squeezed it. “It’ll be okay, dad. There’s nothing this one can do that we can’t handle.”

She was comforting me? It worked. I squeezed her hand back. “You better believe it.”

His expression was flat, though I could see the spark of fire in his eyes when they passed over Avriel. “A truce for now, seraph,” he whispered.

Avriel nodded his agreement.

Abaddon took a step closer to me. “The path I take is beyond the reach of the Beast’s power. Understand that you will have only what you carry in, and nothing more.” His eyes shifted to Clara. “I know you wouldn’t want to harm your child.”

I took a deep breath, focusing and pulling in power from the air around us. If Clara was a battery, that meant I could use the power she was holding if I needed to, but it would come at a cost. We wouldn’t have the luxury of waiting for her to recharge once we were in Ross’ presence.

I felt the energy rush in and fill my soul, creating a throbbing pressure at the base of my spine. Unarmed, with no idea what we were walking into and only a gut full of power to fight it… I wasn’t certain this wouldn’t be the true test of strength.

“I’m ready,” I said, looking over at Clara. She squeezed my hand again, and I returned the gesture.

“Then follow,” Abaddon replied. He turned, swinging his dark essence behind him like a cloak and letting it wash over us for just an instant. It was an intentional move, a warning. He was powerful enough out here. Where we were going, he was the ultimate force.

“Can you fight him inside, if you need to?” I asked Avriel in a whisper.

“I will do my best, but I expect that I will lose. All I can do is buy you time to flee.”

They weren’t the words of encouragement I was looking for, but they would have to do.

We walked behind him, through the doors into the pedestal, and then up the stairs and around back. When Abaddon pushed open the door to the janitor’s closet, I lost my breath.

I should have guessed that his secret path would be hidden here. I fought against the memories and emotions as he swung open the hidden door and climbed down ahead of us. Was Ross the one making things this way? Was he using what he was learning against me, to try to put me on shaky ground? I remembered that he couldn’t know where we were now that we were under Abaddon’s wing.

We reached the base of the ladder and Abaddon led us forward. The hallway here was unlike the one under the real Statue. It was pitch black save for a few dim sconces of purple hued flame that lined the walls, tracing the route forward into a doorway of nothingness.

“Remember, child,” Abaddon said, turning back to look at me. “I will not help you once we pass through. I am only a guide, and an observer.”

“Yeah, I got it,” I replied, trying to calm the beating of my heart. I felt Clara take my hand again.

“Let’s make them regret ever messing with us.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I was really starting to feel a bond with her.

Together, we stepped into the void.

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“Rebecca, get the Box,” Sarah said. “Now!”

I was frozen in shock while the demon walked towards us. His eyes were washed in hellfire, his body glowing along the scarred runes dug into his skin. He’d trimmed his beard and slicked back his white hair. Even more surprising, his damaged hand was whole.

“Izak, no!” Sarah moved to intercept him.

I broke out of my trance and headed towards the airlock that separated us from the Box. A line of hellfire rose up in my path.

“Izak!”

Sarah stood right in front of him, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. He met her gaze, and his face twisted in pain.

The Deceiver. I gripped the hilt tight, feeling the warmth of the power through my hand. It was a simple illusion, but I hoped it would be enough. I ran for the door again.

I could feel the heat from the other side of the room. I’d flipped his perception of it, and he had attacked the wrong place. I fell into the clean room, stumbling towards the Box.

“Izak, don’t let him control you. Izak!” Sarah pounded her fists

against his chest, but he didn't react to her at all. He clenched his new hand and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked right at me.

I don't know how he defeated the power of the Deceiver, and I didn't have time to care. I rolled away from the blast of hellfire that flowed from his other hand, passing easily through the glass and striking the air above me. I felt it hot against Elyse's scarred head, and I scrambled on my elbows towards the Box. Even if I reached it, I had no idea how I would get past the fiend.

"Izak!" Sarah backed away from him. "Stop, now!"

I felt the wave of power. I went to my knees and looked through the melted glass. Izak stood there, looking at Sarah.

"You can fight," she said. "Don't let him own you."

I stood and approached the Box, feeling a sense of relief at its proximity. I put down Truth and took it in my hand, and then jammed it under the tight waistband of the yoga pants. It was uncomfortable against the skin, sending waves of heat and cold through Elyse's body.

Sarah was stroking Izak's face, her small hand gentle on his rough skin. He was branded, a puppet to Gervais. That meant the archfiend had to be nearby.

Without warning, his hand came up, and smacked Sarah's away. His mouth curled into a snarl and his muscles rippled in confusion. He shoved her back, throwing her across the room.

I didn't have time to think. I leaped towards him, through the open space the hellfire had made, bringing the swords to bear and coming down on him with a fierce double-strike.

He took two steps back and raised his hands, summoning a sword of hellfire and using it to deflect Truth. He caught the Deceiver on the forearm, the runes flaring and deflecting the demonic blade.

His return blows were blurs, and it was all I could do to get Truth up in time to block the sword and protect me from the heat of the fire. I caught it edge on edge and twisted, turning beneath the momentum and stepping back beside him. He smiled and drove forward, flaring the hellfire and leaving me on the defensive.

The lab wasn't a wide open space to fight in. I ducked and dodged around tables and computers, staying close enough that he had to use his sword but far enough back that he couldn't hit me. It was clear within a few seconds that he was a superior fighter, and it

would take pure luck to get out of here with the Box.

Then I tripped on a wire. It caught my foot and sent me stumbling backwards. I dropped Deceiver to put my hand against a wall and keep my balance, and got Truth up only inches from my face. It protected me from the heat of the hellfire, and the demon and I grappled together. He was taller than me, but my face was close enough to his to see his expression clearly. He didn't want to fight, but he had to.

Which made him as much of an enemy as anyone else. More than anyone else. He had put enough fear into Joe that he'd given up without a fight. Looking into his sorrowful eyes, I knew he was the biggest thing standing between Landon's freedom and his complete slavery. If Gervais got his hands on the Box and the archfiend knew what to do with it…

My anger flared, and I shoved against him with as much force as Elyse's small frame could muster. It was enough to slip the lock. I leaped sideways and rolled across a desk, feeling the heat of his blade behind me and hearing the spark and sizzle as it tore through the furniture. I hit the ground already moving laterally, digging into the sports bra and finding the black stone. We were so close, Izak and me. I pressed my palm tight against the stone to summon the black blade in the same motion I threw the rock at him.

He didn't see it as a threat. He didn't even try to block it. It changed in midair, replaced with the long stick of alloy that could kill both demon and angel alike. It went right past his defenses, hissing and sparking when it struck the skin and buried itself deep inside. The runes of power covering his arms flickered and faded. He stopped moving and looked down at the protruding expanse.

Then he looked at me.

I'd expected to see anger, and relief. I hadn't thought his sad expression could get any sadder.

The sword hissed in his chest and the smell of frankincense was overwhelming. He should have fallen. He should have died.

He didn't.

He reached up with his new hand and took hold of the hilt. He was slow and deliberate while he pulled it out of his chest, his eyes locked to mine. If I hadn't been so surprised, I might have been smart enough to run while I could. Then again, I doubt I would have gotten far.

He held the blade up. I watched his wound vanish beneath the

stench of dead flesh. It was only then that I realized what was happening, and what Izak had truly become. His hand was whole again, but it wasn't *his* hand. I couldn't be sure, but it wouldn't have surprised me if it had once belonged to Gervais. That was how he was controlling him. That was how he had healed.

My revelation was short-lived. The spatha whistled through the air towards my head. I backed up just in time, feeling the coldness of it nick Elyse's cheek and send a line of blood into the air. I got Truth up to block the second thrust, and felt the flare of tattoos trying to fight off hellfire that got too close. It would have incinerated my arm, but instead it only burned.

The dance started again, only I had been losing before, and now I was down to a single blade. I ducked and twisted, thrusted and parried, turned and leaped and kicked. I used everything I knew, and every muscle Elyse had worked to perfection.

In the end, it wasn't enough.

In the end, there was only one thing left for me to do. There was only one thing I could do. It was the path of least resistance, and it made me question everything Sarah had said and everything I wished I could be.

In the end, I had to be the demon, and think only of the win. It didn't matter if the cause was good, or even if Elyse would have understood and done the same thing. In my heart I knew it was wrong and I did it anyway. It had worked the first time after all, but I could have saved her the first time.

I knocked aside the hellfire sword and leaned forward, into the path of the second blade. I prepared to be run through, ready to use the moment that Izak dropped his guard to remove his hand.

I hadn't expected Sarah to screw it up.

The Deceiver knocked against the spatha, pushing it out of the path of my body. She put her weight against Izak, shoving him to the side and succeeding in bringing him off his feet. He crashed into a table and onto the ground, his hand raised and shooting more of the flames towards her. The Deceiver protected her from the heat, and she rushed him and brought it down at his chest.

He knocked it away with one hand while bringing the spatha up with the other, stabbing Sarah in the gut and catching her in his arms as she fell. For just an instant his eyes changed, and he let out a weak wail of torment that would plant its memory forever in my soul. His hand fell away from his body, and he burst into tears.

There was no time to waste. I was on him in two steps. I found the Deceiver laying next to them and I scooped it up and brought it down, severing his arm at the elbow. He grunted in pain and looked down at the wound. The hand landed on the ground and began to scream.

"Izak, we need to get her to the armory. Let's go." The Nicht Creidim had one of the amulets. If she were still alive, it might save her.

He didn't hesitate. He got to his feet, still holding her in his good arm and ignoring the damage to the other. The sword was still buried in her stomach and blood was running down her legs, but her eyes were open and holding a measure of life.

He paused on the way out, putting his foot to the hand and igniting it in hellfire. The screams continued until it had finished burning away.

I picked up Truth and we raced out of the lab, down the hallway to the armory. The walls around us were singed and burned, the remains of Izak's inception. I put Elyse's hand to the lock and cursed at the slowness of the door mechanism. Once inside, I found the small shelf where the amulet had been kept and prayed to God that it was there.

It was. I cracked the crystal open in my hand and pushed Sarah's head back so I could pour the blood into her mouth. If Elyse was right, her wound would heal. I could only hope Elyse had been right.

I pulled the spatha from her stomach while Izak rocked her in his arm, the tears flowing down his face. I pressed my hands against the wound, willing the warmth of the flow beneath them to decrease and subside. It didn't matter what I wanted, only how the power of the blood would act on her mortal self.

Her eyes opened more, and she took a deep gasping breath. The wound grew hot beneath my fingers, forcing me to let go. She gulped in more air, and then turned her head to the demon.

"Izak. Are you okay?"

Izak smiled and nodded his head, then lowered her down and kissed her on the cheek.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"You saved my life," she said.

"I owed you one."

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“It looks like the gang’s all here,” Obi said.

“Not the whole gang,” Ulnyx replied, looking at the Box.

We had retrieved the Damned from the stone in the ruins of the Nicht Creidim stronghold, and taken it, Truth, the Deceiver, and the Box out of the area; which had been decimated by Izak’s attack. The entire dock was on fire, the cement and steel scorched and melted, and on emerging from what was left of the warehouse I had made the assumption that Obi and the Were couldn’t have survived.

They had proven me wrong.

According to them, Ulnyx had benefitted from Izak’s first pass, when he had killed the soldiers who were pinning him down. Free to move, he’d followed behind the demon, and bounded past him to grab Obi before he was noticed. Izak had been focused on retrieving the Box, and had ignored the two of them. Or, more likely, he had bypassed them and spared their lives because they weren’t standing between him and his orders.

They were waiting on the outskirts of the damage, hidden in a dark corner and keeping an eye out for either us or Izak. When we’d

exited together, Obi had stolen the closest vehicle he could find and brought it into the war zone. We'd gone full-speed back to the airport, and now we were standing in the hanger outside the plane, waiting for the techs to finish refueling.

"I can only imagine how Gervais is going to react when Izak doesn't come back," Sarah said. She was holding tight to the fiend's good arm. As soon as we had gotten clear of the docks, he'd used his own hellfire to cauterize the wound and begun treating it as though he had never had the damaged arm to begin with.

"He's going to be rightfully angry," Max said, emerging from the plane with Brian trailing behind him. He was holding towels coated in a wet gel; an anti-burn ointment to treat the blistered skin my brush with Izak had left Elyse with.

"This is going to hurt," Brian said when he reached me. He took the towels and wrapped them around my forearm. "The towels were dipped in holy water. Max says it will help you heal faster."

The pain of the wound had been excruciating, but I had refused to show it. Now I smiled at the icy hot relief given by the wrap. The holy water couldn't mend mortal skin, but it would negate the nature of the wound.

"We need to collect the remaining blades and make our way to Paris," Max said. "As I had feared, Gervais was alerted to the swords' relevance to the Box when Joe put the two together. He sent Izak here for the mother load, but he'll have other servants searching for the Destroyer. Izak, do you know if he knew its whereabouts?"

Izak shrugged with his good arm, pointed at me, and then moved his fingers as though he were typing.

"No," I said. "If Joe had found it, he didn't tell Elyse." But why would he?

"You understood that?" Obi asked. He had warmed to me just a little, after Sarah had recounted what had happened. On one hand, I was grateful to have proven something to him. On the other, I knew what I had been about to do. If he had known, his opinion would surely have gone the other direction.

"Excellent." Max said. "I was hoping that would be the case. We can still come out on top, but we're going to have to get the timing right. I believe divide and conquer will be appropriate here."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We booked a flight plan for Paris," Brian said.

I was still confused. “I thought the Destroyer was in Shanghai?”

Max smiled and clapped is hands. “It is, my hot buttered rum. In the hands of a seraph named Lu, though he may not quite remember he has it.” He pulled a folded piece of paper from a pocket, and tossed it to me. “His address is on the paper.”

“Great, you gave me a piece of paper. Unless it can transport me a thousand miles west, how am I supposed to get there?”

Max put up his hand. “If you’ll step outside with Brian and myself,” he said, motioning towards the front of the hanger.

I followed behind him, with Brian at my side.

“You look amazing in that body,” he whispered. “Much better than that salesman you showed up at my office in.”

“Impure thoughts?” I asked. I tried not to smile, but failed.

“A few,” he replied. “It’s the tattoos.”

Max opened the smaller door inset into the larger hanger doors, and then waved us through with a flourished bow. “Right this way, my friends, right this way.” We shuffled past him and onto the tarmac. He closed the door behind him, and put up his hand again before I could say anything. “All will be revealed, cupcake. Give me just one moment.”

He reached into his pocket, removing a small gold cross from it. I could see the Templar script etched into the back. Max closed his eyes and began to murmur. A moment later he changed, his body growing and transforming into his true reaper form.

“Max?” I had no idea what he was doing, but they had hidden the plane for a reason, and now he was making himself as obvious as any Divine could.

He turned his head back. “A moment, Rebecca. Please.”

“Did he tell you what this was about?” I asked Brian.

He shook his head. “He just said he wanted me to be out here because it would help smooth things over. I don’t know what that means.”

I couldn’t even begin to guess, but I didn’t have to. Max stopped talking. A breeze began to blow along the runway. Something fell from the sky - a white streak of light that touched down right in front of him.

“You?” the newcomer asked, his gold-edged wings folding back behind him.

“Adam,” Max said. “It’s a pleasure.”

The seraph glowered, and a blade appeared in his hand. He had

brought the Deliverer. “If you were calling me for a fight, have at it.”

Max chuckled. “Do you think I’d have gone to the trouble of summoning you just to box your ears? We need your help.”

“We?” Adam glanced past Max, to where Brian and I were standing. His eyes stayed on his mortal counterpart. “What kind of angel are you?”

Brian’s face flushed. He already looked unnerved by Adam’s presence. “I… uh… I…”

“He’s a changeling,” I said. “A mortal angel.”

The Deliverer vanished, and Adam strode over to him and put his hand onto his back. “How?”

“You don’t know?” I asked.

He turned to me. “I’ve been busy trying to fix the damage the Beast did when he possessed one of the most populated cities on the planet.” His attention returned to Max. “A Nicht Creidim, Max? You expect me to take you seriously?”

The reaper put his hand on Adam’s shoulder. “Don’t underestimate her. She’s full of surprises.” His eyes fell on mine for a short second. “I expect you to help us solve a problem. A mortal has turned into an angel. Think on that for a second or two, and maybe you’ll make the correct connection.”

“Mortals changing into demons,” he said.

Max clapped his hands. “Bingo, old chap. Now, how many angels do you think have been created?”

He shrugged.

“I can count them on one hand.” He pointed at Brian. “Do you want to guess how many demons?”

“They aren’t all bad,” Brian said, before Adam could answer. “Most of the ones I met are just as confused about this whole thing as I am.”

“Yet, my boy,” Max said. “Their genetics and their personalities mark them. But then, the seraph have been forbidden from dallying with mortals for how long? Oh yes, since God created them.” He smirked at Adam. “By the way, Brian, your father wasn’t your father, if you know what I mean.”

Brian turned white.

“Get to the point,” Adam said.

“I told you, we need your help. Landon put the Beast in the Box, but he didn’t capture all of his energy. It’s leaking out into the

world at large, and the consequences are disastrous."

Adam was still while he considered. "We're stretched thin to breaking as it is."

"He isn't telling you everything," I said. "For one, people who aren't being turned into angels and demons are getting sick and dying. For another, Gervais is after the Box. You can imagine what he wants with it."

Adam's face paled. "I've heard stories about Gervais. I was hoping they weren't true." He held up the Deliverer. "They say this thing is about as useful as a toothpick against him."

"Maybe slightly more useful," Max said. "It is longer, after all. Anyway, we do have one ace up our sleeve. Izak is back in the fold."

"At least you have some good news." His eyes were hard, and his jaw clenched. "Tell me what you need. I knew our situation was fragile, but it seems everything I'm fighting for will be for nothing if I don't at least listen to you."

Max punched him playfully in the shoulder. "That's my boy! I have some more good news. We have the Box, and I have a plan to rid ourselves of the Beast once and for all. The first part is simple: I need you to take Rebecca here to Shanghai. Are you familiar with Master Lu?"

Adam shook his head.

"I'm not surprised. He's been here for quite a bit longer than you have. He owns a large estate outside of the city. It's more of a Buddhist monastery, really. Anywho, be careful. His followers are quite zealous."

"Zealous how?" I asked.

"Lu is a bit of a recluse, but I don't blame him considering what he has been charged to do. He won't see you, despite our feathered friend's credentials as the First Inquisitor. You'll have to… shall I say… make him? Defend yourselves if needed, and subdue your opponents, but don't kill them. He won't talk to you if you kill them."

"What is this Master Lu supposed to do for us?" Adam asked.

"The Destroyer," I replied. "The Sword of Gehenna."

His eyes widened. "You know where it is?"

"I know where all of them are," Max said. "Three of the six are in the hanger behind us. You have one, Gervais has one. Can you see where I'm going with this?"

“Why do you need them all?”

Max’s smile was devious. “It’s a long story, but why do you think they were all created, and then stolen away?”

Adam didn’t respond. His eyes came back around to me. “I’ve never tried to carry a mortal,” he said. “I don’t know if she’ll survive.”

“We’ll be fine,” I said. I lifted my shirt just below the chest to show him some of the lines of tattoos covering Elyse’s body. “She has protection, and I’m not mortal.”

I could feel Brian’s eyes on Elyse’s firm abs, but Adam didn’t even notice. His eyes traced the runes, deciphering them. “We?”

Max circled around and put his arm across my shoulders. “I said full of surprises, did I not? Adam, meet Rebecca Solen. She was stabbed in the heart with the Redeemer, and now-“

“You’re a spirit,” Adam finished. “I also know who you were… before.” I expected him to be condemning, but instead he just looked sad. “It will take a large measure of penitence to earn your way to His grace.”

I felt the same sadness in my soul, but I fought to hold it back. Regret wouldn’t help me. “I know,” I replied.

Max stepped forward, pulling me along until I was only a few inches in front of the angel. “Satisfied?” he asked.

“Yes,” Adam replied.

A soft shove, and I was against his muscled chest. Strong arms wrapped around me, and I looked up at him. His expression was kind and nurturing. Of course he knew how the Redeemer worked, and what it had done. At least there was one person who could see me as I was today, despite my past betrayals.

“Meet up with us in Paris,” Max said. “Try to be discreet when you arrive. We don’t want to attract attention too soon.”

“Hold on tight,” Adam said. I put my arms around his torso, locking them just below his wings. They flared out behind him. “This will only take a minute.”

“How do you know my father wasn’t my father?” I heard Brian asking Max as we launched into the sky.

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The black doorway stood in the center of a vast sea of ruin. It was attached to a slagged metal frame, a remnant of a structure whose shell and girders hinted at its past magnificence. Destruction surrounded us. Massive buildings, taller than anything I had ever seen, twisted and bent and broken. Roads that stretched on to the horizon cracked and torn apart.

Bodies laying everywhere.

It was a scene right out of any number of dystopian sci-fi flicks. It was the end of the world brought to life.

“How far do we have to go?” I asked.

Abaddon was standing in front of us, looking out over the wasteland.

“Abaddon?”

He turned around and looked at me, raising his eyebrows. He smiled and pointed out the way forward. That was all the help he was going to give.

“Where are we?” Avriel asked. I could see his body shivering at the sight of all the dead. They were almost everywhere; men,

women, and children. They lay crushed under chunks of metal, run through by glass, or simply ripped apart, their bodies in pieces amongst the stone and steel.

"It looks like Mumbai," I said. "Or what it would have looked like if we hadn't stopped Ross."

Except the landscape didn't match the Indian city. It was somewhere else, or more likely it was nowhere; a representation of a city, not an actual city. It was Abaddon's creation; his road, his rules. I stopped gawking and hurried to keep up with him.

We picked our way through broken stone and mangled streets. We passed hundreds of corpses. The smell of spilled blood hung heavy in the air, mingling with burned flesh and offal. It was disturbing to look at, and I could feel my stomach churning with increasing urgency for every step we took.

Still, it hardly seemed dangerous.

There was nothing alive here. No people, no animals. Not even a single blade of grass. It was cement, and mortar, and iron.

The demon continued in front of us, marching through it all with his power flowing out around him, the lord in his finery. His head moved back and forth over the wreckage, as though he expected something to move out there.

Nothing did.

"I don't get it," I said to Clara. She continued to keep a grip on my hand, while Avriel stayed right behind making consistent turns and twists, keeping a vigilant eye on our surroundings. "Abaddon made it sound like we'd be lucky to make it through here in one piece."

"I don't know," she replied. "I have no sense of anything here. It's like we're in the Box, but not in the Box."

We kept walking. I don't know how much time passed, but it felt like hours. Regardless of how far we had gone the landscape never changed. More buildings, more bodies, and after a while we all became numb to it. I stopped smelling the death, and soon enough stopped noticing it at all.

Then, I heard crying.

It was the first sign that there was anything out here besides us. A soft, deep whimper that rose through the rubble and found its way to our ears. It was hard to pinpoint at first, and I motioned for Clara and Avriel to stop so their footsteps wouldn't cloud my hearing. Only Abaddon continued ahead, oblivious to my intent.

“Get him to stop,” I said to the angel. The sobbing was louder now, somewhere off to the left, amidst what looked like a burned out department store.

Avriel’s eyes landed on Abaddon. “I’ll do my best, but I cannot make him do anything here.”

His wings spread and he hopped forwards, a giant leap that brought him down before the demon. Abaddon tried to keep walking, but Avriel moved into his path. After a few repeated attempts to go around, he stopped and looked back at me. A smile creased the corner of his mouth.

“A trick?” Clara asked.

It made sense that it would be. We had no idea if the demon was playing it straight, or if this whole thing was a setup. He didn’t need to go to such lengths. If he’d wanted to take me on, he could have done it the moment we’d entered this place. There was no reason for him to walk us for hours. It wasn’t as though we would tire, starve, or die of thirst here. I could hear the crying, and I wanted, no, needed to find the source. I couldn’t picture anyone or anything being left alone out here, even if they turned out to be a figment of my imagination or a random construct of Abaddon’s will.

“This way,” I said, following the sound off into the destruction with Clara trailing right behind me. I found the power I had conserved, making sure I could call on it if there was a need.

I picked my way over the frame of a door, reduced to nothing more than a hunk of slagged metal, and wound my way through some fallen stone. Chest high shelves were visible throughout the space, though most had been toppled, some had been trashed, and all were empty. A portion of the roof had collapsed near the back, and a beam of sunlight was angling in to land on the corpse of a woman. She looked peaceful there, wearing a long silver dress and bathed in light, wisps of long brown hair pushed over a long face.

What made me cautious was that I didn’t see any wounds, or any blood. What had killed her?

I moved more slowly, crouching down so that I wouldn’t be visible if there was anyone or anything else in here with us. Clara followed my lead, and together we wound our way through the aisles, the sound of sobbing growing louder as we moved further inside.

Then it stopped.

Of course it did. Whoever was there, they had heard us coming.

I stopped moving, and listened.

Footsteps.

They were slow and careful, just like ours. One set, a single person walking perpendicular to our position. I stayed crouched and looked back at Clara. She raised her palms to the sky, suggesting we go up and over the obstacles. I nodded and gestured for her to wait.

I was careful in pulling on the power. I needed just enough to stay airborne for a few seconds, to find the target and come back down in front of them. I didn't want to waste energy I might need. I bent my legs slightly and focused, pushing off and bouncing towards the ceiling. I put my hand up to steady myself when I reached it, and scanned the space for the target.

A person, a man, it seemed. He was on his knees, leaning over the woman in the silver dress, his right arm out and touching her face. I pushed off from the ceiling and angled myself towards him, landing behind him with little more than a soft swish of air.

He turned his head.

I was looking at myself.

I stumbled backwards, confused. He stood up and watched me, hands at his sides and tears wetting his cheeks. I balanced myself, trying to swallow my surprise. He didn't just look like me. He was me. My eyes fell back to the dead woman on the floor. I didn't recognize her.

"Who are you?" he asked. "How did you survive?"

"I… I don't know what you're talking about?"

"The cataclysm. It isn't possible." He drew what looked like a cross over her forehead and stood up.

I glanced back, looking for Clara. She was still hiding amidst the shelves. "What happened here?"

His eyes narrowed. "Did the council send you?"

A gust of wind crossed between us, scattering some of the dust like ashes.

"Council? No. The demon, Abaddon, brought me here. I don't know where I am."

"Abaddon?" He was more confused. "I can tell you aren't lying, but how can that be? I have never heard of any Abaddon. Not on the council, not anywhere." He laughed. "And to bring you here? Here of all the places in the universe? I take it he is no friend of yours." He continued laughing, long after he stopped talking. There was something about the laugh, something very familiar.

“Where is here?” I asked again.

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied. “One world of many that are dying, thanks to the guile of Erastus and my own fool heart.” He looked back at the woman. “Thirty thousand years. I should have known better. Love them, adore them, but never put them first.”

I stared at the body, feeling my heart begin to race. Thirty thousand years? I looked at him again. I wasn’t stupid, but I was still in the dark.

“What happened?”

He shook his head. “The whole story would take a lifetime. It is enough to say I made the wrong choice, and now the balance I have spent an eternity fighting to maintain has been broken. This world is burning because of my mistake, as are all of the inhabited worlds.” The tears dropped from his eyes, falling to the ground at the feet of his love. “An eternity,” he repeated. “For nothing.”

Clara had told me that Ross was once like me, although I never expected that he would look like me. Somehow, Abaddon had arranged for me to see him at the moment of his failure. To what end? To make his point about the futility of fighting to keep the balance, and show me that no matter how many eons passed I was ultimately doomed to follow in Ross’ footsteps? Maybe he wanted me to give up and let Ross loose, so his own end could come more swiftly than I could manage it. Maybe he simply delighted in watching my reaction. Or maybe…

“Clara,” I shouted. “Clara.”

She didn’t respond to my calls.

I focused, gathering my power for another leap. Not for height, but to get out of this place and back to the demon. He had done a fine job distracting me, and I had fallen for his betrayal like a complete chump.

“Erus.” A new voice, and then a new person appeared, materializing from nowhere halfway between Ross and me. I knew him in an instant.

“Malize?”

He didn’t respond to me. His hand rose, and Ross was blasted back into the rubble. His face reddened, and he strained against invisible bonds.

“The council has found you guilty of treason,” Malize said. “You’re to be brought before them to face your punishment.”

This wasn’t right. Malize was an angel, a creation of God. I had

to find Abaddon.

“I will not,” Erus said. The wind gathered around us, throwing rubble everywhere. I focused, dropping to the ground and creating a vortex of my own, defending myself from the incoming storm. Malize pulled his cloak tight around himself, using it to deflect the stones. The action freed Erus from his tether. He saw me hunkered down below the onslaught, and the maelstrom paused. “Get out of here,” he said. “Die a death that is more dignified than this.”

A gust of wind caught me and pushed me back away, even as Malize let go of his cloak and drew a golden blade from his hip. Erus turned to him and snarled, changing into something wholly inhuman. He slammed into the angel, throwing him backwards with such force that they both crashed through the mangled shelving, through the stone and steel and out into the distance. I heard a crack echo, and felt the heat of flames.

I needed to find Clara. I ran back the way I had come, past where I had left her hunched and in hiding. I left the remains of the building, and looked out across the destruction to where I had last seen Abaddon and Avriel.

They were both gone.

Anger filled me, and I focused, steeling my muscles and launching forward. Even as I did, a dozen monsters appeared from within the broken frames of the buildings. They were duplicates of the creatures we had fought earlier. The demons Abaddon had sent for Avriel.

They tried to circle me, but I threw myself at the nearest one, pushing aside its grip with enhanced strength. I hit it hard in the jaw with a fist and sent it tumbling backwards into a wall. Twisting in the air, I landed facing the others. They were coming on strong, heavy legs shaking the ground below me. I could sense my own power diminishing, certain that I didn’t have the reserves to take them on. I had known trusting in Abaddon was a risk, but I hadn’t expected him to break a promise in blood.

I found a stone and picked it up, holding it in front of me like a shield. It was heavy in my grip, and I didn’t dare waste the energy I had to make it easier to carry. Instead, I crouched and waited, ready to use my own power in bursts to swing the stone in an effort to break them. I wasn’t about to give up, to let Abaddon win, or let Ross win, or abandon Clara and Charis. What he had tried to show me hadn’t wounded my spirit, it had only made it stronger. If I was

destined to fail, then one day I would fail. One day, I might regret my decision to love, my decision to connect, and my decision to hold onto the things that made me most human. One day, I might find myself faced with the death of everything I believed in, and everything I had hope for.

One day… but not today.

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We landed on the outskirts of Shanghai less than a minute later, in a small, empty field of grass. The flight had been both terrifying and exhilarating, putting an extreme amount of pressure on Elyse's mortal body, while also providing a sense of freedom that was undeniable.

"Where to?" Adam asked, releasing me from his grip.

I pulled the address from my pocket. "I don't suppose you have GPS?"

Adam smiled. "Not quite, but I do have perception of where the other seraph are. I think it's safe to assume this Master Lu would be one of the strongest signatures."

"Makes sense, but then why would Max have even bothered giving me an address? He'd planned on having me take the Adam express."

"Good point." The seraph reached out and took the paper from me. "Xincunxiang." He shook his head. "I can sense something there, but its weak. Weaker than any angel I've ever met. Weaker than most Touched."

“Sounds like the perfect disguise.”

He nodded and held out his hand. I took it, and he pulled me back into his embrace. “We aren’t far. This one will be quick.”

It didn’t seem as much like flying as it did teleporting. One second we were in the field, the next we were standing at a set of large timber gates. They had carvings of dragons on the face, and had been lacquered over in blue about a hundred years ago, leaving them faded and chipped today. A small canvas banner hung from the sides of the gate.

“The House of Life,” Adam said.

“Why did you land on the outside?” I asked.

“Max said they wouldn’t take kindly to aggression, and I’m not sure the monks inside know that their master is a seraph. I’m not even sure he knows he’s a seraph.”

“How is that possible anyway… a buddhist angel?”

“Buddha wasn’t a god, and didn’t call himself one. You can believe in the one true God, and still seek to be enlightened.”

A small bundle materialized in his hands, and he shed the toga for a more modern t-shirt and jeans combo. I tried not to stare while he was stripped down, but the seraph’s sex appeal was undeniable. He seemed oblivious, and as soon as he was dressed he stepped up to the doors and pulled a handle attached to the left dragon’s nose, bouncing it off the door a few times with a solid thump. I hadn’t even realized it was a knocker.

We didn’t wait long for the doors to swing open. A small boy in gray robes smiled at us and waved us in. Adam bowed to him, so I followed suit, and then we entered the complex.

It was a simple place, a large green yard in the fore, with gardens sectioned off further back. To the right was a long, low house where I could see other monks entering and departing, and to the left was an open pagoda structure under which others sat prostrate and still on woven mats. I could see that the compound stretched further out behind the buildings, but the layout was obscured from view.

“Welcome. Namaste,” the boy said. He was speaking Chinese, but I found I could understand him. Normally I was only able to handle whatever languages my host knew. It had to be Adam’s doing. “Did you come to enroll?”

“Enroll?” I asked.

“To join the House of Life,” he said. His voice was soft and

peaceful.

“Perhaps,” Adam said. “We’d like to speak to Master Lu. It’s very important.”

The boy smiled wider and bowed his head. “My apologies, traveler, but Master Lu is in a deep meditative state. It would be very unwise to wake him.”

“I understand,” Adam replied. “Perhaps there is another we can speak to? Someone must be in charge of the House while Master Lu is meditating?”

The boy bowed and waved his hand again. “Yes. Please, follow me.” He started walking towards the building to the right, talking as he did. “Back there are the gardens, where we grow all of the vegetables, and you can see our outer sanctum.” He pointed at the building as we circled around it. “This is the longhouse, where we sleep. There are ninety-three brothers and sisters in the House right now, but I’m the youngest. I was born here.”

He led us past the longhouse, and now we could see another grass field, with a much larger structure behind it. It was simple despite its size, made of wood and needing a paint job as badly as the gates had.

“The inner sanctum, and administration,” he said. “We work with local farmers, mending clothes and the like in trade for rice and occasional transportation to the village. It is a simple life, but such simplicity breeds self-mastery and understanding.”

A group of three monks exited the building and walked past us as we entered, two women and a man, all with gray robes and shaved heads. They gave short nods in our direction. Even their steps seemed peaceful to me.

“Everyone here is Touched,” Adam whispered beside me. “He’s blessed them all. That must be why his power is so diminished.”

“How are we going to get them to let us see Lu?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“Sister Xiang is overseeing the Master’s affairs while he is occupied,” the boy said. He stopped and removed his shoes, and then pointed at our feet. “It is a sign of respect to leave your feet bare, but then comes the true test. Only those with pure hearts may enter.”

Adam slipped off his sandals, and I reached down and pulled off the hard-soled slippers Elyse had been wearing. Our guide waved us on, and we passed under the entrance to the building - an archway

with seraphim scripture carved into the wooden frame. I felt a bit of pressure as we passed beneath. A pure heart had nothing to do with it. The building was warded against demons.

The inside of the structure was as worn and simple as the outside. Wooden beams crisscrossed one another on the ceiling, holding up wooden planks that composed the upper levels. The walls were made of rice paper, grimy with their years, but still covered in beautiful depictions of mountains, flowers, and oceans. Simple sliding doors separated one room from another, and the sounds of talking, cooking, and praying could be heard echoing along the corridors.

"This is the door to the inner sanctum," the boy said, tapping on a slightly more ornate, hinged wooden door. It bore the same dragon on its face as the gates. He pulled it open just a crack so we could see inside. "There is Master Lu."

I could feel my jaw go slack when I saw him. A diminutive man with long white hair occupied the center of the room. He was tied at the wrists and hung from an ornate crossbeam that bore a vague resemblance to a cross. The beam and Master Lu rested in the center of a small pyre which engulfed him to the knees, though he appeared unharmed. He wore nothing but a loincloth, and his head lolled to the right.

"Is he-"

"Dead?" the boy asked. "No. He is in a deep meditative state. He does this to show us what we can accomplish by unlocking the true power of our souls. The flames cannot harm him." He pulled the door closed. "If you decide to stay, maybe one day you'll be able to sleep in the flames. I hope to try it for the first time next year. If I do, I will be the youngest ever." He looked down at the floor. "Master Lu would tell me not to be so proud. That is why he is the Master, and I am just a student." He looked at us and smiled. "Come, Sister Xiang is right over here."

He led us across from the inner sanctum, to an open room with a small flat table in the center. A woman knelt there, scribbling on top of a stack of papers.

"Sister Xiang, we have visitors," he said.

The woman looked up. She was a tiny thing, even smaller than Elyse, with a round face and brown splotches along her otherwise fair skin. Her robe was brown instead of gray, and it blended with her tone so that it looked more like a part of her body instead of

cloth. She rose and bowed to us. There was a soft shimmer around her, like the air couldn't quite stay still in her presence. It followed her motion as her head dipped and rose again, leaving me staring.

"Welcome. I am honored to meet you both. My name is Xiang. I am the keeper of the House of Life while Master Lu is sleeping in the flames."

Our eyes met, and I felt a strange chill run through me. I looked over at Adam to see if he had noticed something strange about Sister Xiang, but I expected he couldn't.

She was a spirit.

"The honor is ours," I said, fighting to stifle my surprise and returning the bow. "My name is Elyse, and this is my brother, Adam."

Adam bowed his head. "We've come to speak with Master Lu about a matter of some urgency," he said.

Xiang smiled. "I have learned over the years that impatience is a cancer on our souls. Geishan, would you honor us by fetching some tea?"

The boy bowed and ran from the doorway.

As soon as he was gone, I pulled the black stone from my pocket and summoned the spatha. Adam's gaze flipped towards me in shock, but Xiang's only reaction was to let the smile fade from her lips.

"Re… I mean, Elyse, what are you doing?" Adam asked.

"Who are you really?" I said. I had no way to know that she wasn't the spirit of Sister Xiang, surviving in the small woman's body, but I doubted it. If you could take any mortal host you wanted, why would you choose someone with obvious abnormalities?

Adam put his attention back on Xiang, sizing her up. He surprised me by trusting enough to follow my lead.

"Another poltergeist?" she said. "I had thought there was a chance someone would come around asking for the crumpled old chicken, but I hadn't anticipated one of my kind." She reached under her robes, extracting a pair of sai. She planted them into the table in front of her. It was beneath her standing reach, but I was sure she wouldn't have done it if she didn't know she could grab them.

"Adam, you need to try to wake Lu," I said. "I'll take care of this one."

I felt his hesitation for only a breath, and then he backed out of the room.

Xiang laughed. “Don’t you think I’ve tried to wake him?” she asked. “I’ve been trying for almost two weeks. I even stabbed the little bastard in the heart, but I couldn’t get any cursed weapons in here to really give him grief.”

“Adam has something you don’t,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“He’s family.” I lunged as if to attack. She didn’t move.

“I’m four thousand years old, Elyse. I’m not going to fall for cheap tricks.”

“It was worth a shot.” I took a step backward and moved into a guard posture. “Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“I’m, shall we say, a free spirit,” she replied. “For now, my lot is cast with the Parisian archfiend.”

Hadn’t she said she arrived two weeks ago? Max had made it sound like Gervais had only learned about the swords when Joe had tried to use one on the Box, but that had only been this morning. Something was off somewhere, and the one thing I knew for sure about Max was that he was an accomplished liar. The question was, why?

She must have seen the confusion in my face, because she dove forward, grabbing the sai in mid-roll and coming up in a billow of her robes. I barely managed to move my face in time to keep the thrown blade from skewering my eye. Even so, it grazed the side of my temple and left a sharp sting in its wake.

The other sai was still in her hand, and she stayed low and went for my calf. I danced back away, avoiding the stroke, but she spun neatly on her toes and swept her leg through my path. I let the collision knock me over, falling to my back.

She didn’t press the attack. It was a more subtle trick, but she knew it all the same, settling herself on her feet in front of me and drawing another sai from her robes.

“How many of those things do you have?” I asked as I got back up. I used the back of the towel on my arm to wipe the blood away from my face.

“Enough,” she said. “Your form is clumsy.”

“What did he promise you? Money? Power?”

“I could take those things for myself, as you well know. This world is a playground for us, an endless stage of existence. We can

be any mortal we want, we can do anything we want. Even the other Divine hardly know we exist at all."

"Then why?" It was a strange time to be having the conversation, but I really wanted to know. Was there something to my situation that I had missed?

"He won't let you in, Elyse."

"Who?"

Her eyes flicked upwards. "You know who. I was a mortal once, and later a fiend. I was stabbed in the heart with a sword, a special sword that brought me into this life and gave me a new purpose. It was a gift that I believed had saved me. Redemption." She spat the word as though it was a curse. "For nearly a thousand years I moved from mortal to mortal, seeking to make amends for the evils I had done. I became a midwife, and saved hundreds of mothers and children from certain death. I became a scientist, and worked to cure disease. I even became a missionary, spreading His word across the world, in hopes of earning His forgiveness."

A sad smile spread across her face, and she shook her head. "One day, I went to a sanctuary in Turkey. I approached the angels there and told them my story. They brought me inside, and bade me to step into the light of Heaven." Tears began to roll from her eyes, two tiny slivers of moisture that dripped and vanished into the robes.

"What happened?" I asked. I could feel my heart was racing.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"They told me that if I was truly redeemed, He would have lifted me up into His arms. They said my penitence was not complete."

The words made me cold. A thousand years of good, and she had been denied? What did that mean for me, the vampire who had freed the Beast?

"So you decided to be evil again?"

"Don't be foolish. I decided that I was done existing to the whims of hidden masters. I'm not good or evil. I'm only what they've made me, and what I've chosen to be. Today I serve Gervais, because he's promised me retribution. To help bring the end of God? That leaves a thrill in my soul." She lifted a hand and wiped away the tears with the back of her index finger, her face turning to stone. "You'd be wise to save yourself the heartache, and follow my lead instead."

Her words made sense. I knew they did. How could He truly forgive me for loosing the Beast on the world? There was no level of sorry that could cover it, and no amount of piety to bring back the lives of the thousands who had already died because of my actions. I lowered the spatha, aiming the point at the ground and keeping my eyes on Xiang. She was still, waiting for me to see her reason.

What was I? A vampire? A demon? An angel-in-waiting? My mind raced and whirled. At the center of the storm there was one word that stayed focused, a small bubble of energy that held the secret of my own truth. Sarah had understood, because she had needed the same kind of clarity. Maybe Xiang understood too, but she had chosen a different path. God's greatest gift was also His greatest weakness. I was free.

"That isn't who I choose to be," I said, raising the blade again. "Maybe He'll never call me into His warmth, but I have no right to demand that He does. Neither do you."

She shrugged. "Have it your way. You still can't defeat me, and Adam will never be able to wake Master Lu." She lunged forward again, faster than I could follow, leading with her left arm and using it to hook my own blade and pull it out of the way so the second sai could get through. It jabbed into my abdomen, digging through muscle before being stopped by bone.

"You must have been in a hurry to find a mortal body," I said through the pain. I reached down and grabbed her arm before she could bring it back, squeezing her wrist to make her drop the blade stuck in my side, and then twisting until it broke. I still didn't let go, instead pulling her towards me and slamming my forehead into her nose. Elyse was a warrior. Sister Xiang was a capsule. The spirit's mind may have been willing, but its host wasn't able.

I could have killed her then, by stabbing her through the heart a second time. I didn't need to. The body fell limp in front of me, the shimmer in the air fading. My true enemy had fled.

I lowered the woman gently, wincing at the pain from the sai in my gut. I held my breath while I removed it and tossed it onto the floor. I needed to go find Adam.

I stumbled out of the room, almost knocking into Geishon on the way by. He looked at me with fear in his eyes, and then turned his head towards Sister Xiang.

"She's alive," I said. "We were attacked." I showed him my own wound. "She needs help."

“Give me your hand,” he said.

“What?” I didn’t have time for this. I could see the door into the inner sanctum was hanging slightly open, but it seemed still inside.

“Give me your hand.” He reached out and took it. I watched as his eyes began to glow in a faint white light, and I felt a warmth flow through my body. The pain in my stomach began to fade, as did the stinging of my arm.

“What did you do?” I asked as he let go of me. The wounds were healed.

“Master Lu says we must always give succor to those of pure heart. Your wounds were made with evil intent, and so they have been healed. That is the power of the House of Life.” He smiled mischievously. “Well, one of them.”

“Sister Xiang,” I said. “It wasn’t her fault. She was possessed. She needs healing.”

“Don’t be afraid, Elyse. The pure of heart will always be healed. Where is your brother?”

“Inside. I’m sorry, but he needed to wake Master Lu.”

“He did wake Master Lu,” a soft, old voice said. The ancient seraph ambled through the door, with Adam right behind him.

“Master Lu, my apologies,” Geishon said. “I told them not to wake you.”

“Be at peace, my son. You have done well. You have all done well.” He took my hand and patted it. “Let go of the fear in your heart and follow the path you know is right.”

My heart started pounding again, and in that moment I felt enough joy to bring tears to my eyes.

“I’ve got something for you,” Adam said, bringing the Destroyer from behind his back. “It turns out Master Lu is not as confused as Max would have us believe.”

“Be wary of that one,” Lu said. “I don’t know what game he is playing, and it may be that he has the best of intentions. A creature like Samael cannot help themselves but to lie and cheat, even when the truth would be the straightest path.”

Enough lies had been revealed in the last five minutes that I didn’t need the angel to tell me that. Max was up to something, and the shaky trust I’d been reserving for him was eroding fast.

“Do you know Max, Master Lu?” I asked.

“Samael gave me the sword for safe keeping many years ago. I was never sure of his purpose, and that is why I devoted myself to

meditative practice. I needed to know that when he came seeking the blade again I could give it to him with a clear conscience. And so you have come, and so I have released it from my protection. The meditation allows me to see the world as it is, my child, not how each of us would like it to be, or believe it to be." He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it. "Go now, and be at peace. Even if you lose, you will still win."

I didn't completely understand, but I didn't need to. I felt a strange peace settle over me. "We will. Thank you, Master Lu."

Adam and I headed for the door, while Lu knelt down and whispered to Geishon. I looked back and saw the boy scamper into the room with Sister Xiang. Lu saw me look, and he bowed his head to me.

"You didn't kill the spirit?" Adam asked.

"I don't know how to kill a spirit," I replied. "She ran away, and there aren't any clean mortals she can take for a dozen miles at least. How did you wake him?"

He laughed. "I didn't. He opened his eyes as soon as I approached him and asked me to take him down. The weakness… it's a gimmick. I don't completely understand his purpose here, but it isn't my place to question the Lord's will."

We passed beneath the scripted doorway and out onto the lawn. "Let's get ourselves to Paris," I said. "I'll wait while you change." I set my eyes on him and smiled.

"I don't need to use the wings to fly," he replied, reaching out and gathering me in his arms. "It's one of the perks of being an Inquisitor. They can really get in the way when you're trying to be discreet."

"Adam?"

He had looked up towards the sky, about to take off. Now he stopped. "What is it?"

"The Inquisitors were formed to find the swords. Well, we've found them. What are you going to do after this?"

His breath tickled my ear when he spoke. "Assuming there is an 'after this'? Our main purpose was to track down the swords, but our secondary mission is to find whatever lost relics and artifacts we can. I suppose we'll put a greater focus on that."

"So you're counter to the Nicht Creidim?"

"In a way. We've clashed with them a number of times over the centuries, but the Nicht Creidim are the enemy of all the Divine.

Present company excluded, I guess."

"This is a temporary truce," I said. "It will end when Landon is free and the Beast is destroyed once and for all." I had no idea what Elyse planned to do after that. Her father was dead, and her home was ash.

He chuckled. "I'd be interested to see how your host is received by her people, after she gave aid to the Divine."

"The Beast is everyone's problem, as are the changelings. Can they be that steadfast in their rules that they won't be able to see how she's helping them?"

Adam lost his humored edge. "Trust me, Rebecca. I know from experience how blind we can be in service to our beliefs."

Before I could say anything else, we were launching into the sky.

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Adam and I were waiting on the runway when Brian's jet arrived. It touched down without fanfare and taxied over to a spot on the tarmac not far from where we stood. We walked towards it, arriving at the base of the ladder at the same time Max's face appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, there you are, peppermint patty. I take it you retrieved the blade?"

Adam turned his hand, and the Destroyer appeared in it.

Max clapped his hands together. "I knew I could count on the two of you." He started climbing down the stairs, with Ulnyx, Obi, Sarah, Izak, and Brian behind him. "We have much to do, and not a lot of time."

"The van should be here soon," Brian said, looking down at his phone.

"Well done, my good man." Max reached us and put his arms around me. "So, how is Master Lu? I see your burns have been healed."

I wasn't sure how much I should tell him. The angel's warning

was still fresh in my mind. His heart might be in the right place, but I had been on the deceitful side before. If he was as good at it as he claimed, we'd never see it coming. "Old," I replied. "His stand-in, Sister Xiang, gave us the sword. She also healed the burns."

He pulled back and looked at me, testing me for my honesty. "Interesting."

"Is Izak safe to be this close to Gervais?" I asked, looking at the demon past Max's shoulder. The fiend was sticking close to Sarah, his demeanor suggesting the loss of half his arm was nothing more than an inconvenience.

"Yes, yes. I carved a ward over the brand. They're easy enough to deal with if you can get close enough to the branded, and if you know what you're doing."

"So, what's the plan, man?" Obi asked.

"Good question. Sarah, the Box, if you please. Adam, I'm afraid we'll need the Deliverer and the Destroyer now."

Both weapons reappeared in his hands. "Now? We still only have five."

"I'm afraid so. All of the swords need to make it to the Beast's prison. Any one of us can carry them, but they all need to make it. Do you understand?"

Adam nodded slowly and held them out. Ulnyx stepped forward. He was holding a long duffel.

"Just toss them in here," he said, unzipping it.

I watched him surrender the weapons. Max was taking away our best protection. I looked at him for a reaction, but there was none.

Sarah had pulled the Box from a canvas bag, and now she handed it to the reaper. "Now what?" she asked.

"We just brought Avriel's Box to Paris," Max said. "By my calculations, we have between three and ten minutes before all hell breaks loose."

We all stared at the reaper.

"That's why we're here, isn't it. In any case, it will spare you the anxiety of anticipation. Don't think, just act."

"We're still forty miles from Gervais' chateau, Max," I said. "What the hell are you thinking?" I looked out over the horizon, and felt a chill. Ulnyx was looking that way too, and he started to shift.

"You thought we were going to do this at Gervais' house? Now that would be suicide. Trust me, pudding, and retrieve that dark

sword of yours."

The problem was, I didn't trust him. He always seemed to be one step ahead of everyone, and Lu's warning had only cemented it.

"Ulnyx, you'll need your hands free. Rebecca can take the blades."

"Just what I wanted to hear," the Were said. He had finished shifting, and used his claws to slip the bag off his massive frame.

He heaved the duffel at me like it was made of paper. I let it clatter onto the ground, and then scooped it up by the handle and slung it across my back. I shook a couple of times to make sure it was somewhat secure, and then grabbed the black stone and summoned the spatha. It was weird to be holding such a relatively simple blade when I had an arsenal hanging over my ass.

"What am I supposed to do?" Brian asked. His face had turned white and he was shaking.

"Just stay behind me," Sarah said. She held her hands at her sides, her expression fierce. There was no fear there, only a smoldering anger that surfaced whenever her father was involved.

He didn't keep us waiting long.

He came from the air, falling from the sky in a streak of darkness, hitting the ground with a loud smack, and rising to his feet unharmed. A wave of demons landed behind him; fallen angels and winged devils carrying vampires, weres, and fiends. There were at least a hundred of them, a number that would have been challenging but doable for the force we'd assembled.

Except, these weren't typical demons.

None of them were alive.

They were damaged in different ways. Some had nasty gashes across the face, others scars along their leathery skin. All of them had a dullness in their eyes, and they moved with such uniform precision that it was obvious their ultimate freedom had been taken from them. They were zombies, much like what the Beast had launched at Landon in Mumbai, only augmented by their Divine size and strength.

"You see, the power of the swords won't help us here," Max whispered to me.

"This is crazy," I said.

"Trust me," he repeated.

The fate of the world may have been resting in the palm of his hand, and the self-proclaimed God of Lies was asking for trust. I

tried to stay calm, but I was starting to feel like I imagined Brian did.

"Do you like them?" Gervais asked. He didn't look much different now than he had before, beyond the flatness of eyes that bore no reflection, no pupils, no living energy. His curly mop of black hair twisted down over them, and his simple beige cotton tunic and pants made him look like he should be vacationing in the Caribbean. "The perfect demons. Completely under my control." He glanced over at Izak, whose own eyes were alight in fury. "Free again, I see. Enjoy it for the few remaining minutes it will last. It is good to see you again, daughter." He leered at Sarah, and then turned to Max. "I'll take that."

Max looked back at me, pausing for only the barest instant.

He tossed the Box to Gervais.

"Max?" I meant for it to come out as a shout, in anger and pain at the betrayal. It left my mouth as little more than a whisper.

"My apologies, pumpkin pie," he said. Then he punched me in the mouth.

The blow caught me off-guard, and sent me reeling. I could feel the weight of the duffel slipped from me as I stumbled, grabbed by the reaper in one quick motion. There were shouts of confused anger behind me, and all hell *did* break loose.

An angry snarl sounded behind me and Ulnyx leaped forward at Gervais, his huge claws spread wide to scissor his head from his body. It was a rash move, an emotional outburst, and a stupid thing to do. Gervais didn't flinch, didn't move. He just put his hands up and caught the Were's wrists on their way in, a black energy pouring from him. The oil-like power coated Ulnyx, and when it vanished there was nothing but ash. It floated into the archfiend, catching in his hair but leaving him otherwise unharmed.

Gervais looked back at Sarah and smirked. Max had shifted into his reaper from, and he lifted the archfiend away even as a gout of hellfire fell where he had been standing.

"Trust me, my ass," I shouted after him. It was all I had time to do, because his undead demons rushed in at us.

Adam found his way to the front of the horde, a new blade in his hand. It was a standard-issue seraphim sword, but blessed or cursed, it didn't matter. The only thing that would stop them was the cruel cutting edge. We put ours to good use, digging in and getting washed over by the wave, flailing claws and teeth against

metal. I heard Sarah try to Command the ones that moved past me, but I doubted it would have much of an effect.

Blasts of heat sent tingles up my spine as Izak joined the fight, his hellfire seeming to be our best weapon against them. I twisted and swung, decapitating a vampire and finding myself facing him. I could see him standing his ground ahead of half a dozen burning effigies, alight in the deadly flames that could reduce Brian and Sarah to ash in seconds. Even on fire, as long as they could move they would keep coming, and Izak lashed out with his good arm to keep them back, only to find more coming his way. They knew who the real threat was, and they focused on it with all of their intensity.

I cursed Max again and jerked away from the tip of a sword, grabbing the wrist that held it and lopping it off with a backhanded cut. There was no cry of pain. In fact, the attacking demons made no sound at all. It was the quietest battle I'd ever heard.

Sarah screamed, and I saw one of the fiends had gotten his hands on her. Izak was too far away. We were all too far away. He brought his other hand up to her throat, wrapping it there and holding tight. For an instant, there was fear, and then it was gone. Something inside her broke. I could almost feel it, even in the middle of the scrum. Her lips curled into a snarl, and she brought her own hands up. The tips had extended into claws of her own, and she succeeded where Ulnyx had failed, bringing them together through the demon's neck and severing his head. The hands didn't let go.

I heard Obi then, his voice loud and angry. He didn't have the Eagle, but he did have a long dagger that he was using with reckless efficiency, tearing through flesh and clearing a path to Sarah. He got to her and grabbed the headless form, forcing it to release her and then throwing it to the ground, where a line of hellfire burned it.

"This is bad," Adam said, coming to stand next to me. He had a deep gash on his free arm, the bone protruding through it. "Their touch isn't killing me at least, but it isn't healing either."

"We're dead either way."

"You're not."

In the moment, I had forgotten about that. The demons could kill Elyse, but they couldn't actually hurt me. I could get away. I could find a new host and chase after Max and Gervais. I could try

to stop them, and if I failed I could find another host and try to stop them again, until there were no more people left in France, or until they succeeded in taking the power of the Box for themselves.

I shook my head. “I can’t stop them alone.”

“We can’t stop them at all.”

“Just keep swinging that sword of yours, Adam. Maybe we’ll get a miracle. Let’s fall back to the others.”

We started retreating as we fought back-to-back, trying to get closer to where Izak, Obi, and Sarah were standing their ground in front of the jet, with Brian hunched down behind them. We had put at least two dozen of the demons out of the fight, but it was hardly enough to slow them down. Even worse, Izak had been forced to stop washing them in flames, since it had only made them more effective weapons.

“Welcome to the cool kids club,” Obi said as we joined them. He was drenched in sweat but otherwise unharmed. “It just so happens we have a few new openings.”

A patched and mottled were snapped its jaws at my face, and I leaned back while Obi stabbed it in the neck and used the dagger as a handle, flexing his arms and throwing it to the side. It knocked over a vampire and they both stumbled, but only for a second.

“The plane,” Brian said in a weak voice. “We need to get in the plane.”

“The plane will help you, signore, but not if you go in it,” Dante said. He appeared out of nowhere right next to Brian. He grabbed the fake angel and vanished.

“Dante?” Obi asked. He reappeared, wrapped his arms around Sarah, and disappeared again.

“Grab onto one another,” Dante said when he popped into existence the next time. He put his hand on Izak’s shoulder and faded away.

“I don’t know what the hell is happening, but getting out of the middle of this crap is fine with me,” Obi said. He backed up so that he was pressed up against Adam and I. Together, the three of us pushed back against the horde, their numbers working against them while they all tried to grab us at once. When Dante appeared again, he was so close I had to banish the spatha to keep myself from stabbing him.

“Time to go,” he said, pointing to the distance. A lone figure was standing there, bathed in hellfire. Vilya.

He grabbed my wrist and I felt like I was falling through a black hole. Then I was back in the real, standing outside a hanger well away from the demons. Obi and Adam were still pressed against me. I regained my senses just in time to feel the rumble and see the earth split below the plane. A geyser of molten earth and flame burst up into the jet. I could feel the heat of it from across the distance, even more so when it exploded, catching all of the demons in a massive burst made more powerful by the Demon Queen's power.

Not all of them were incinerated, but the ones that weren't found themselves on fire, turning in circles in an effort to find us, their eyes burned away in the heat. Vilya walked right into them, sword in hand, decapitating them and knocking them away. Once there weren't any left standing, she started coming in our direction.

"I don't understand," I said. "She's a servant of the Beast."

"Not quite, Signora Solen," Dante said. He looked on me with an odd mix of respect and disdain. "Consider your source."

"Max?" Obi asked. "I'm going to rip that guy's head off."

Dante smiled. "Don't be so quick to judge. He is a liar, it is true, but he plays that card quite well."

"What are you talking about?" Sarah asked, her voice hoarse, her face a dark mask of conflict. She flexed her hands, which had reverted back to normal, and leaned on Izak like she was about to collapse. "They killed Ulnyx."

"I'm sorry about the Were. It was an unfortunate miscalculation," Dante said. "We should have accounted for his temper."

"Miscalculation?" I asked. What would Landon think about that?

"We need to move," Vilya said, having run the rest of the distance to reach us. "The rift is inside." She moved through us to a hanger door that I hadn't had a chance to notice yet, shoving it open and waving us in.

"It was all a trick," Dante said. "To separate Gervais from his army. Max planned the whole thing, and only Vilya and I knew about it. Now we need to get to the chateau before the archfiend has a chance to begin his work."

"A trick?" I said. "A freaking trick!" Master Lu must have been in on it too, or at least known about it. He had planted the seeds of doubt in my mind and made my reaction to the betrayal all the more believable.

I followed the others inside, to where Vilya was finishing opening a hell rift.

“What the heck is that?” Brian asked, shying away from it.

“It’s okay,” Adam said. He was holding his broken arm across his chest, and using his other hand to put pressure on the still bleeding wound. “Just wait here. It’s clear you aren’t cut out for this.”

“No,” Dante said. “He needs to come.” He put his hands on Brian’s shoulders. “It is no accident that you are here, signore. Please, help us to save this realm from destruction.” Brian still looked frightened, but he nodded. Dante smiled. “Grazie.”

The rift lit up, and Vilya stepped through. Izak, Sarah, and Obi followed.

“It’s like Star Trek,” I said. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

He reached out for my hand, and I took it. Rifts weren’t that much like Star Trek - a first-timer was guaranteed to come out the other end disoriented. I only hoped he wouldn’t faint.

I led him through, and we came out the other side in the sewers below Paris, in the room where I had left Avriel to be tortured by Abaddon. Izak was waiting there alone, and he waved for us to follow.

“Are you okay?” I asked Brian. He leaned over and vomited in response.

“Keep moving,” Dante said, appearing away from the rift. “I shall meet you inside the chateau.” He vanished.

I pulled Brian along while we ran after Izak, making our way through a tunnel covered in burn marks, soot, and ash. I could see there had been runes lining the walls once, but they had been mangled and broken by whatever heat had made its way along the length.

We caught up to them at another rift, which Vilya had just finished activating. “This leads to the chateau,” she said. “I think we’ve killed most of Gervais’ creatures, but I wouldn’t put it past him to have left a few behind. I’ll go first. Izak, protect our rear.”

He nodded and turned his attention to Sarah, who was hanging even more heavily from his arm.

“Leave her here,” I said. “She can’t help like that.”

“No,” Vilya replied. “She has to come, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” Sarah looked up at me, her eyes heavy and filled with tears. Her free hand was balled into a tight fist. “I have

to do this.”

Vilya vanished into the rift. Brian groaned as we approached it, but didn’t slow.

“I’ll never go to another trekkie convention,” he said.

We stepped through.

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The creatures moved in without fear, as though they knew I wasn't strong enough to repel them. I held the stone at chest height, muscles straining to maintain it. Finally, three of them came within reach, and with a howl I focused and brought the stone up, leaping and cracking it into a skull that was ten feet over my head, using my other hand to grab the beaten monster's shoulder and vault over it, while the other two tried to change direction. It brought me down closer to the others, but the maneuver confused them, and their size made for poor agility.

I swung the rock around, cracking it into a kneecap, ducking and rolling backwards away from a gigantic foot. The demons howled and screeched around me, shoving each other aside to make room. I brought the stone up over my head to block an attack, tensing my arms and feeling my feet sinking into the ground in an effort to deflect the force. I threw the rock upwards, smashing another skull, leaping up behind it and catching it on the way down.

If there hadn't been so many of them, it might have been

impressive.

Instead, my strength was fading, and one more blow against my shield from a heavy claw left me on my back a dozen feet away. I dropped the now too-heavy stone and tried to scramble to my feet, feeling a level of exhaustion set in and starting to accept that I was going to lose.

The demons approached, their howling louder, their teeth chattering in anticipation.

Abaddon stepped in front of them.

His essence billowed out around him, casting forward like a net and wrapping around the creatures. Their glorious howls turned to hopeless moans, and their knees buckled beneath the power. I watched while he fed, the tendrils of his energy forcing their way into the monsters, finding their souls and drinking them dry. I could barely see him amidst the shadow of his power, but I was sure I heard him sigh.

Then it was over. The creatures were gone, their bodies gray and falling to ash. Abaddon turned to face me, his cloak shrinking out of my path.

“Hurry, child. We must hurry.” He held out his hand to help me to my feet.

I grabbed it and let him pull me up. “I thought-“

“I betrayed you? In other circumstances, perhaps, but we had a promise in blood, and my word is the only precious thing that remains to me.” His red eyes filled with dark flames. “He found a way to use your child against you and I both.”

“The Beast?”

He shook his head. “No. Not the Beast. There is another entity here, one that I do not recognize, and did not see. She tried to warn you, to show you his true purpose.”

“Malize?”

“I do not know that name.”

My blood ran cold. Malize had come to collect Ross after the universe had been broken, and now Abaddon was suggesting he was somehow here, in the Box, and he had taken control of Clara. Was it Malize, or a shade of Malize? Or was it some nascent energy that had been embedded in the Templar script that powered it? Either way, I wasn’t sure what to make of it. He had passed himself off as an archangel to Charis and me, but Clara’s warning was suggesting something far more sinister. Was he a benevolent being

in search of justice, or an agent of whatever had caused the destruction, seeking its final end? He had brought me this far, aided us in our fight against Ross. He had delivered Avriel to us, and provided the gun that was still resting in the small of my back. He was supposed to be an angel of God.

He had also sent the first round of monsters to attack us, and now he had taken Clara. Her power, our connection… had it ever truly been ours?

What the hell was he really?

"Diuscrucis, come."

I looked at Abaddon and felt my heart sinking. Charis was a Templar, a secret society of Divine that had been founded by the archangel. Did she know the truth of him?

"Diuscrucis." Abaddon's hand touched my face, and I felt the coldness of the despair. It was enough of a shock that it drew me out of my daze.

"Where is Clara?" I asked.

"She and the seraph have taken the path."

"Then we need to follow. Which way?"

Abaddon motioned off to a pile of rubble, and a ruined street beyond it. "There."

We both ran.

My power was gone, spent. My energy was almost the same. I staggered behind Abaddon, fighting to keep up with nothing more than sheer will. If I was going to do anything to help anyone, I needed to get out of this place, whatever this place was.

We reached the road beyond the rubble. Abaddon stopped.

"It has been altered."

"What do you mean altered? Isn't this your path, your route?"

"Yes. It was, until I brought you here." He kneeled down and put his fingers to the ground. "He is trying to keep you away."

I heard motion from our left. Another of the creatures moved out from behind the blown out wall of what used to be an apartment building. Three more followed behind it.

"I can't fight them," I said. "My power is gone."

He turned his head in their direction. His power snaked away from him, tendrils running along the ground. The creatures never saw it until it had pooled below their feet. "He would never expect me to help you, child. He has no concept of my promise, or my respect." The idea seemed to make him angry. The creatures

bellowed and turned to dust under his strength.

"Great. Which way?"

He lifted his fingers to his lips, and pointed back the way we had come. "That way."

I followed behind him again, every step leaving me burning with pain. It felt like we ran forever, along burned and blasted roads.

Erus stepped out in front of us.

His face was burned, his right eye gone. His clothes were torn and singed. I don't know how he was still standing with so much damage. He saw us coming and began to scream.

"For all I have sacrificed. For all I have endured. This is how it ends."

Abaddon lashed out with his power, and threw him away from us. I gave him only a quick look as we passed him by; crying in the dirt, a pitiful, broken wreck.

"We are near," he said. He stopped again and put his fingers to the ground.

"What are you doing?"

"Tracing the power. I have taken this path. I have claimed it with all of the essence that remains to me in this place. It is but a single thread, but it is my domain. He cannot hide from me here, not completely."

He grabbed my arm and leaped. We launched high into the air, a hundred feet, two hundred, approaching a tall building that once had been coated in thousands of panes of glass, but now was just a metal framework. We came down on the roof, landing without a sound. He let me go.

Avriel was standing there. Clara was gone.

"You're supposed to be helping me," I said.

"No, diuscrucis. I was charged with protecting the girl." He held his blade in his hand, and he was blocking the small steel door into the stairwell. I had a feeling it didn't lead down into the skeletal remains of the building.

"Let him pass," Abaddon said. "I made a promise in blood, and you have interfered." A sword grew from his darkness, a scimitar of black despair.

"I cannot. I delivered the girl to him. Now my purpose is to prevent him from fulfilling his duty." The archangel's eyes caught on mine. "All you need do is wait, Landon. He means you and Charis no harm. You will be rewarded for what you have done."

No harm? Clara had shown me who he was for a reason, and it wasn't so that I would put my faith in him.

"Let me pass," I said. I didn't have a sword. I could barely stand up.

It didn't matter.

I walked towards the seraph, my eyes fixed on his. I reached behind me and pulled out the gun. It was still the same, plain thing it had always been. Why had Malize sent me to find this thing, if I wasn't supposed to use it?

Avriel attacked before I could aim, shooting forward and bringing his sword down in a smooth stroke towards my head. I slipped aside, Josette's training and muscle memory kicking in through my subconscious. I reached out and grabbed the angel's wrist, meaning to throw him over my shoulder.

I just wasn't strong enough.

I pulled against him, but it wasn't even enough for him to lose his balance. He wrenched back, throwing me towards the end of the rooftop. Somehow I managed to hold onto the pistol and come to a stop before I plunged over.

Abaddon picked up my slack. He came at Avriel in a flurry of motion, his tendrils of power whipping out around him in an effort to distract the demon. They had danced this dance an infinite number of times, and the angel didn't fall for any of it. He stayed focused on the dark sword, and they came together in a furious clash of energy. I pulled myself to my feet and held up the gun, trying to get a clear shot. The motion was just too quick.

They pounded at one another, the hate and anger obvious from both. I could feel the temperature drop around me, and my breath caught when the first wave of hopelessness crashed against my soul. I knew the same power was hitting Avriel, but which of us would break first?

It wasn't going to be me. I got on my hands and knees, and then on my stomach. I inched towards the doorway, sliding along the rooftop, using my arms to propel me and trying desperately not to attract their attention. They circled one another at a dizzying rate, their weapons smacking and crashing, each hit a sizzle of energy that ionized the air around them.

Still I crawled, my mind focused only on Clara and Charis. What was Malize going to do to them? What was Malize going to do to us all?

A sword landed in front of my face.

“You will not pass,” Avriel shouted. His need to stop me was without logic. Abaddon tackled him, and they both vanished from the rooftop.

I reached up and grabbed the hilt of the sword, using it to pull myself to my feet. Then I removed it from the stone, feeling the lightness and balance. The door was only a few feet away. I stumbled forward and grabbed the handle, turning it and throwing it open.

I stepped through.

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We came out of the other side of the rift and into the small room Gervais had set aside for it. Vilya was already at the door, holding her hand out to keep us quiet and surveying the hallway.

"It's clear," she said. "Follow me."

We filed out into the hallway, a long corridor that ended in a set of stairs. Brian was a new shade of white at my side, clutching his stomach and trying to hold back another round of puking. He knew we couldn't afford to make a sound, and he made a valiant effort to keep quiet.

We reached the stairs and made our way down, into the lower levels where the archfiend kept his laboratory, as well as his prisons. We moved with a slow haste past the barred cells where corpses of demons remained imprisoned, awaiting their return from the end. They were damaged but well-preserved; Gervais must have been doing something to them to keep them in a more usable state. With every footstep I expected them to rise up and cry out in alarm, or try to rip their way through the runed bars, but they remained still.

I heard Sarah gasp when we passed the final row of cells, having reached the one unique prison where her mother had once been held captive. I glanced back and saw her clenching her hands and teeth, with Izak rubbing her back and gently pushing her forward. There was no time for memories.

We'd reached the archfiend's torture rooms when we heard the murmurs of his voice, speaking to Max from the room beyond. There had been a solid door there once, but now it was missing, the hinges bent and mangled like it had been ripped away. I knew Landon must have done it. I had left Gervais there for him to find, and he hadn't let me down.

"I'm telling you, my Lord, it won't work. Even in your state you can't collect that much power without being burned away by it."

"You promised me you could assist with that, Samael. You swore." Gervais' voice was flat, emotionless. Even his anger came across as a dead thing.

"I can, but I need more time. Malize-"

"There is no more time. Fulfill your obligation."

"Malize hid the ring even from me. He must have known not to trust me too far. I know I can find it given time, but this was to be expected. You can't rely on a trickster like me and not face a certain amount of adversity."

We crossed the room, using their voices to help disguise the sound of our footsteps. I didn't know how the archfiend hadn't sensed our presence, but I had a feeling Max had something to do with it.

"Adversity?" Gervais chuckled. "I'm minutes from becoming a god, and you want to speak to me of adversity? Where is the ring, Samael?" Max cried out, and I heard a thump. The archfiend must have thrown him into a wall. "Never mind. I'll take my chances that you're either wrong, or lying to me."

Vilya waved us to either side of the doorway. I came to rest against the wall right behind her, with Brian still tailing close to me.

"Izak and I will distract him," she said over her shoulder. "Dante will get the Box. You need to grab the swords. Max will lead you through the portal to the Beast's prison."

"What do we do then?"

"We must sink the blades into the Box at the same time. When the door opens, the Beast's power will be drawn into it. We are

hoping it will draw in Gervais' stolen power as well."

"Hoping?" I didn't like the sound of that.

"My Lord, you can't," Max said. "If you fail, you will destroy everything."

"I'll destroy everything anyway," he replied. "Once I am a god, why would I settle for just these worlds? The entire universe will be for the taking."

Vilya motioned to Izak, an intricate pattern that I didn't understand. The demon nodded, stepped out into the doorway, and coughed.

There were no words spoken. There was no sound. At first, a stillness sat in the air that threatened to choke off all of reality. Then I felt the coldness of Gervais' power. I heard a crash, and Izak and Vilya rushed ahead. I trailed right behind them, waving for the others to follow.

Max had used the surprise to ambush the archfiend, slamming him hard in the head and throwing him across the small room. He was still on the ground when I entered, getting to his feet and looking amused.

"The deceiver has double-crossed me? Well done, Samael."

Max hadn't waited to see his reaction. He was crossing the floor to the southern wall, where I could see an intricate patchwork of Templar script had been etched. Had he learned the language, or had someone written it for him?

"Go ahead and open it, Samael," Gervais said. "I'll be along soon." His eyes fell on Izak, and he leaped forward, moving so fast I couldn't follow him. A slick of darkness trailed behind, and then snapped forward when he reached the demon. Izak fell sideways, avoiding the dark energy, and Vilya moved in behind the archfiend, slamming into him and sending him ahead. He hit the wall with enough force to dent the metal, rolled over, and got back to his feet.

"Signora, the swords." Dante appeared out of nowhere. The Box and the blades were resting on a small cart in the center of the room. He grabbed the cube and started backing away.

"No," Gervais said, rising to his feet. He put out his hand, and arcs of black energy launched towards the poet. They fell away when Izak tackled him.

"Follow Dante," I said to those behind me. I couldn't waste any more time watching. I dashed forward, coming to a quick stop at the cart. I grabbed the duffel and swung it over my shoulder,

returning it to my back.

Dante was nearly across the room, and Max was already there, chanting in a deep voice with his hand pressed to the etched metal wall. The runes were glowing in a golden hue, casting an eerie light that began to fill the room. Adam was leading the others to the same spot.

"I'm done with you, Izak," Gervais shouted, loud enough to overcome Max's incantation, and loud enough to get our attention. He held the demon by the neck with one hand, and had pinned his good arm with the other. Anger and pain swam across the fiend's face. "I tried to make you part of this. What demon doesn't dream of standing in the shadow of such power? Yet you continue to abandon me, first for my sister, and then for my daughter."

"Let him go," Sarah said. Her voice was weary, her face ashen.

Gervais spun to face her, still holding Izak. "Let him go?" He laughed. "Make me."

Vilya was a bolt of lightning, shooting towards Gervais. She had a blade in hand, and she leaped towards him, rotating her torso and bringing it down on the archfiend with all of her strength. He didn't move. He didn't react. He continued staring at Sarah, challenging her, daring her to attack him. The blade struck him at the base of his neck, and disintegrated into nothing.

She had put all of her energy into the blow, and she lost her balance, stumbling away and falling to the floor. The corrosion continued down the hilt of the sword and onto her hand. She held it up to her face, panic in her eyes, and watched her skin and bone begin to waste away.

"You can't hurt me, Vilya," he said, his voice still flat. "None of you can hurt me. All of your tricks, Samael. All of your lies. They're for nothing."

Max finished his work and fell silent. The light from the door was intense now, bathing everything in its glow. The script had faded away to nothing, as had the wall. All that remained was a glowing portal that led to the Beast's prison.

"Let's go," he said.

Dante was the first to go through.

"What about Izak?" Obi asked. "And Vilya?"

"They're dead," the reaper replied. "They knew it was going to end this way. They understood the need." He stepped through.

"I'm not leaving him," Sarah said. Her head stayed fixed on her

father, as though she could see him through her eyeless sockets. Her flesh was gaining color, and she continued to flex her hands. “Even if you kill him, I’m going to kill you.”

“A pleasant thought I’m sure,” Gervais said. “Come and get him.”

“Obi, take Brian and go,” I said. I took the duffel from my back. “Adam, take the swords. I’ll get Sarah.”

None of them looked happy, but they knew they had no choice. Gervais would kill us all. Adam took the swords and vanished into the light, with Obi and Brian right behind.

Vilya had stopped screaming. The decay had done its work, reducing her to a layer of dust on the cold floor.

“Well, my dear?” Gervais said.

“Sarah, don’t,” I said. “We can’t beat him this way. We have to go through the portal and use the Box.”

She didn’t react. I don’t know if she even heard me. Her breathing had slowed, and she looked calm and peaceful. It was more frightening than when she had looked angry. She started walking towards Gervais.

“Sarah!” I grabbed her arm. Pain lanced through every nerve of my body, my muscles spasming and freezing and forcing me to let go. She didn’t even seem to notice. “Sarah!”

I had no idea how to stop her. I couldn’t touch her, couldn’t reason with her. She kept walking towards Izak, and I saw lines of blood along the back of her shirt. With each step she took the blood thickened, until it burst in a flurry of cloth and flesh, and a pair of red and gold feathered wings sprouted from her back. They weren’t plush and light like a seraph’s, but ridged and serrated, menacing and dark.

Gervais laughed.

“I knew it,” he said. “I knew I could coax you to change. I knew I could turn you, and bring out your true power. I knew I could break you.” He shifted his grip, and pulled Izak’s head from his neck. He held it out to her, letting the body fall away. “Thousands of years and all of that power. Wasted on the weakness of love.”

Still Sarah was silent. She was getting close to the archfiend now, and her wings had extended fully from her back, stretching wide behind her and obscuring my view. Izak was dead, Vilya was dead. How was I going to stop Sarah from joining them?

“Sarah,” I cried, one last time. I couldn’t stop her. I couldn’t

touch her, and I couldn't touch Gervais. All I could do was watch her die.

They stood face to face, father and daughter. They regarded one another without emotion.

"I knew it was there," he said. "We will rule the universe, daughter. You and I."

"No," Sarah replied. "You'll die."

There was no battle. There was no struggle. Her wings folded down and in, spreading and changing as they moved. Two tips caught the archfiend's wrists. Two tips caught his ankles, and another caught his head. The feathers dug into the skin like spears, spreading him and lifting him up off the ground. His eyes widened in surprise, and he tried to move, to touch her with his power, but there was nowhere he could reach. He was pinned tight.

I could barely see through the wings to Gervais' face. Sarah brought her hands up to it, and cupped his chin beneath clawed fingers. "Thank you, father," she said. "I could never have stopped you without you." She turned around and started walking towards me, while I stood there in shock.

"Sarah?"

"Let's finish this, Rebecca," she said, walking past me.

"Rebecca?" Gervais asked. All the defiance had drained from him.

She held him aloft in her wings, and carried him through the portal.

I followed right behind.

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There was silence when Sarah and I came through, into the prison where I had been killed. It hadn't changed much since I had been there last, except the blue glow that had once filled the room was nearly gone. Only a slight flow had been left behind, unable to be collected without the blood of the true diuscrucis. The white star still floated near the top of the prison, and it cast a soft light on us.

Then I noticed it out of the corner of my eye. It was sitting exactly where it had fallen those long months ago. The Holy Grail. I felt the sting of memories, and the guilt of what I had helped to start. Now I would help to finish it.

"Holy crap," Obi said, breaking the silence. "That is seriously unreal."

"Sarah?" Adam said.

"I brought him," she said. "Where is the Redeemer?"

"Here." A new voice. A small black and white demon scampered out from behind Dante's legs, dragging the final Canaan Blade behind him.

"Alichino?" I said. "Where did you come from?"

“Alichino was helping Gervais to unlock the power of the Box,” Max said. “It seems his allegiance changes as easily as the wind.”

The demon snickered. “Always bet on the winning team. That’s what I always say.”

“At least we can thank him for creating the portal.”

“We must hurry,” Dante said. “I can’t remain here for long.”

Max held the Box in his hands. “Adam, take the Destroyer. Obi, the Deceiver. Sarah, the Redeemer, Brian, Truth. Alichino, you will take the Damned, and Rebecca, the Deliverer.”

Adam leaned over the duffel, taking out the swords and handing them to each of us.

“An angel, a demon, a diuscrucis. A mortal, a spirit, a changeling.”

He lifted the Box into the air, and let it go. A beam of light shone down from the white star, capturing it and holding it in place at chest level.

“Six swords. Six sides. Six creations. We must all use the blades at the same time.”

Adam rose into the air, to place the Destroyer into the top of the box. Alichino positioned himself below it, and the rest of us each took a side. I felt my heart begin to race, the end of my journey and Landon’s freedom so near. We each held our blades ready.

The Box sat in front of us, its lines pulsing with blue power, its energy radiating around it. Max stood behind me, but he didn’t give the word.

He was waiting for something.

I saw it when he did. A single thread of white in the sea of blue. It raced around the Box, following the scripture that had been carved into its sides.

“Now,” Max said.

I stabbed.

The swords sunk into the Box, much further than they should have been able to without coming out the other side. At the same time, the white light intensified. The Deliverer grew too hot to hold, and I let go and backed away at the same time as the others. We all watched as the light from the star continued to expand, growing larger and larger until the Box was swallowed by it.

Gervais began to scream.

Sarah had held him up above her, still trapped in the wings, but now she shifted and lowered him towards the light. It stretched out

a thin tendril and wrapped around his leg, spiraling up and encircling him while his screams became louder and more pained.

"Sarah, don't do this," he said. "Sarah, I'm your father. All I wanted was for us to be a family, to rule together."

"All I want is for you to die," she replied. "You've hurt enough people. You've killed enough of my friends. Mother may have forgiven you. I never will."

The power was draining from him, feeding back into the white light and through it to the Box. His entire body began to compress on top of itself, losing the energy that was holding it together and keeping him in his existence. Sarah released her hold on him, dropping him to the ground. His eyes shifted wildly, looking at each of us as he shook and screamed.

Then he was gone.

"Max, where is Landon?" I asked. I turned my head, looking for the reaper. "Max?"

He was gone, too.

"Where the hell did he go?" I said. There was nowhere to go. We'd all been watching Gervais, and he had disappeared. Then I looked at the light again. It was definitely big enough, and it did look a bit like a door. "Damn it. He did it again."

"Did what, signora?" Dante asked.

"What do you think? The swords don't open a way out of the Box. They open a way in." I looked into the white light, and took a deep breath. I knew in that moment that this was why I was here. This is what I had been redeemed for. This was His task for me, His test. I released Elyse from my hold.

"*Take care of yourself* ," I said to her.

"Rebecca, what are you doing?" she asked.

"*Saving him.* "

I pushed away from her, letting myself move into the light. I could feel the energy of it, the power surrounding me. I didn't know what Max's intentions were, but I wasn't about to let him have free reign to do whatever it was he wanted to do. If I had to, I would stop him.

A final burst of light greeted me, and then I was through. Everything was dark.

I opened my eyes and blinked a few times, trying to clear them. I took a breath. Another. I looked down to see that I was whole once more. It was my form, my body. I took my hair and moved it

in front of my eyes so I could see it. I licked my lips to feel the fullness of them. I winked my eye.

Max vanished around a corner in front of me.

I knew where I was. I had been here often enough to recognize it. The Museum of Natural History in New York.

I started running.

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I knew where I was as soon as I stepped into it. The Museum of Natural History. The place where it had all began. It was fitting that it would end here too.

I was right outside the chalice exhibit, where the Holy Grail had once rested, and the place where I had died. I could hear voices coming from the far end of the room, though I wasn't close enough to see the speakers yet.

"How did you find me?" Ross asked.

"We always knew where you went, Erus. We couldn't reach you because He gave you asylum. When you repaid Him with your treachery, He allowed me to come to this realm to collect you. I underestimated the damage to your soul."

Ross laughed at that. "Does He even know who you are? What you are?"

"He knows what you are. That is enough."

"I'm what you made me," he shouted. "What you forced me to be. This is your fault."

"Then why was it your guilt that drove you mad? You were safe

here, Erus. He had given you the sanctuary you begged for. Why did you destroy it?"

I shouldered Avriel's sword and started walking. After a few steps, I realized that something was wrong. I was back on the normal path of the Box, but the power hadn't returned. Why had Malize prevented me from coming through, if he knew I was powerless anyway? What was it that he didn't want me to see or do?

I decided to be more subtle than I had originally planned. Instead of walking right in on them, I ducked behind one of the display cases and inched my way forward one obstruction at a time. The one benefit to having no power was that they probably couldn't sense my presence.

"Why did I destroy it? It is what you taught me, Malus. You and your council. Destruction is the only thing that eases the pain. It's also the only pleasure that remains, when nothing ever ends. It's the only challenge left to us."

When we had fought Ross outside the Great Pyramid, he had recognized Malize. He had said his name. Only, now I heard Malus. I was sure of it. Why had he sold us a different name? Had anything he'd told us been true? He wasn't a demon, so I couldn't spot his lies. I had trusted him because Charis had trusted him. We had both made a mistake.

"To us, Erus? No. To me. Catching up to you has almost been fun. A masterpiece of controlled chaos."

I peeked my head up from behind a large, jewel-encrusted cup. I could see them now, near the front of the room. Ross standing face to face with Malus. Charis was bound and unconscious, sitting up against the pedestal where the Grail had sat, her head slumped to her chest. Malus was definitely Malize, and he absolutely wasn't a good guy. The boyish angel was in the same robes I had seen on the path.

He had his arm around Clara.

She was clay-faced, motionless in his grasp. Whatever force was giving her life, it had been put on hold. Could she even hear what they were saying?

"So, now here we are. I knew you were somewhere behind the Box, but I hadn't expected you to make a personal appearance. I've been trying to overcome these two meat sacks so I could bust out of here before someone delivered it to you. They're more resilient than

they look."

He kicked Charis in the ribs for emphasis, which almost brought me out of my hiding place.

"It took me a long time to prepare this trap," Malize said. "Almost as long as it took me to break you. There were so many pieces, so many possibilities. In the beginning, I thought to just collect you and take you home, so we could both delight in your torture, and repay you for your years of service. Only your power has grown in your madness, hasn't it? My first prison was only barely enough to hold you, and nowhere near good enough to transport you."

"How many of His seraph did I destroy, Malus?" His eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"Millions. He was furious enough to allow me free reign. That was when I decided the prison wasn't enough. That taking you home wasn't enough."

I moved forward again. I didn't like any of the directions this conversation was going in. I focused, trying to find the power, but there was none. I had to stop them both somehow, and I had nothing but a sword and a gun with a single bullet. A bullet that I was pretty certain couldn't harm either of them.

"There is so little left to us," Malize said. "So little that can consume the years, and bring us feeling. So few places left that we haven't conquered. He is more powerful than you and I, and yet He refuses to get involved. I will make Him get involved. I will make Him fight."

"I can help you," Ross said, a smile growing on his face. "We may not have enough power to defeat him on our own, but together? Together we can not only take His realms, but destroy Him completely."

Malize regarded him for a moment. "How far you have fallen, Erus. How sad and pathetic you have become. At least when you were fighting for the balance, there was something there to respect. Now, I don't even pity you."

He put out his hand and Ross collapsed into a heap on the floor. He didn't move again.

My brain raced ahead at a million miles per hour as I tried to remember everything that Malize had said to us. The story about his origins, his creation, his tag-team with Lucifer in the war against Ross. He was the forgotten for a reason, and now I knew why. Did

God even remember where he had come from?

Malize leaned down over Ross and put his hand on his forehead. He closed his eyes as the connection began to glow.

I stood crouched behind the chalice, unsure of what to do. Avriel had said we would be rewarded, but what kind of reward could we expect? Malize meant to absorb Ross' power, and then take up his own banner against God and our worlds. He had trapped Charis and I in here because he wanted all of it, every last drop that we held in our souls. He knew the way in, and I was sure he knew the way back out.

I looked over at Charis, eyes still closed but her expression more peaceful now that Ross was dead. How could she have known what Malize was? How could anyone? Few enough could remember him a minute after they left his presence. I looked at Clara, silent and frozen in time. He wanted the power that was trapped in the Box. She had called herself a battery. All of the energy Charis and I had collected by surviving here and absorbing it was held in her visage. More than that, she had said there was a bond between our power and Ross', because it came from the same place. He had no chance against Malize with only half of the power, and he had cut me off from my share.

Divide and conquer.

Now I knew why he wanted to keep me away. I held the gun in my hand, and took a deep breath. I wasn't sure if my idea would work, but there was a sense to it, a logic that snapped into place in my mind.

I heard a groan. Charis. Her eyes fluttered open, and widened with recognition of her supposed mentor.

I didn't know what he would do if he saw she was awake. My time was up.

I stood up. Malize was too busy with Ross to notice. I raised the pistol, extended my arm, and took aim.

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Max moved through the Museum at high speed, making it obvious he knew exactly where he wanted to go. I ditched my shoes and chased behind him, treading as light on my bare feet as I could, hoping that he wouldn't hear me. I didn't want to just jump him, because I couldn't be sure he wasn't trying to help.

So I followed.

We raced past dioramas, through the huge hall full of dinosaur bones, and down the stairwell into the main entrance hall. All the while I remained at least fifty feet behind him, weaving and ducking behind anything I could find. I thought I saw him look back twice, but he didn't react. Either he knew I was there and he was fine with it, or I was imagining things.

At last I heard voices. One I recognized, the other I didn't. I knew the Beast for what he was. I knew him better than most. The other speaker wasn't Landon or Charis. How many people were actually in here?

Max slowed to a stop, and I dropped to my knees and slid at an angle, coming to rest behind a pillar. I peeked out a couple of

seconds later and saw him standing to the left side of the archway into the room beyond, listening.

I stayed low and made my way forward, dancing from column to column in near silence, doing everything I could to avoid detection. I didn't have any weapons, but I was me again. I held out a hand and watched my fingers grow into sharp talons. I opened my mouth and felt my fangs with my tongue. I was all the weapons I needed.

I still couldn't see what was happening, but I got within a dozen feet of Max without being noticed. Just as I reached the spot, I felt a wave of coldness flow through me, a strange feeling of an immense but silent shockwave of energy. Max had felt it too, and now he was back on the move.

I slipped to the wall where he had just been standing, and ducked my head in. Landon! I could see him now, crouched near the front of the room, behind a display case with a large golden chalice in it, a look of indecision crossing his face. I followed his eyes to a woman I didn't recognize, standing still as a statue, to a man hunched over the Beast, and then to Charis. I snapped back to Max. He was sneaking towards Landon, and now I saw he had a dagger in his hand.

There was no time to try to figure out what was happening. It was obvious Max was here to help the stranger. I swung myself around the archway and into the room, hugging the wall and trying to remain silent. Everything I had gone through over the last five months had come down to this place and this time. I needed to stop Max, but the timing had to be perfect. Otherwise I would mess everything up, instead of helping to fix it.

Max was only a dozen feet away from Landon, and I was almost the same distance from him. I watched Landon rise to his feet, a gun in his hand. A gun? He raised it and held it out, aiming it forwards.

My hands became claws, my senses sharpened.

Max stepped up behind Landon, pulling back his arm to strike.

I lunged forward, covering the remaining distance in one long leap. I came down right behind him with silent grace, digging my left hand into his back, and grabbing his right arm with my right hand. I used my momentum to pull him sideways and throw him away, stopping him from his assassination. Without looking, he locked his arm against my grip and pulled me with him as he tumbled.

I heard a gunshot.

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I heard the commotion behind me, the sound of two bodies crashing into the display of chalices against the wall. I fought every instinct to turn and look. I held my breath, and pulled the trigger.

Clara's head snapped to the left as the bullet pierced her skull and travelled through to the other side. I heard Charis cry out in shock. Malize's head whipped towards me while her body tumbled to the floor.

I felt it instantly. The power unconfined, released from the battery in one tremendous burst. I focused, pulling it into me, gathering it as quickly as it exploded away, taking hold of every line and tendril and dragging it inward towards my soul with a desperation beyond desperation. I traced it through her, to the energy of a dying Beast. Malize had been trying to take it, but he had been resisting.

He didn't resist me.

"*I still hate you, kid,* " I heard in my mind. "*But I hate him more* ."

Malize was on his feet. He stretched a hand out towards me, and I felt the push of his power. I caught it, met it, and turned it around,

drawing from a well that seemed infinitely deep. He stumbled back, and then recovered with a smile.

"I had hoped to keep you out of this," he said.

"You knew this might happen," I replied, throwing the gun towards him.

"Balance."

He launched towards me, his entire body changing as he approached.

I focused, casting the power out at his growing mass of dark strength. He fell straight down, once more in human form. He looked up at me.

"I've destroyed one of you already, and you're using the same power. You can't beat me." He swiped his hand to the left, and one of the pedestals flew towards me from the side. I should have been thrown across the room, but I planted my feet and hardened myself. It crumbled against me.

"Do you know why he could't beat you?" I asked. I brought the sword to bear, stepping in towards him and bringing it down. He caught it in his hand and snapped it in half.

"Why?" His face was right next to mine, our eyes locked.

"He didn't have a good enough reason to live."

I focused, pushing against him. The power sent a shockwave through the air that shattered the glass of every display case in the room. Malize flew backwards, slamming into the rear wall and dropping to the ground. I didn't hesitate to chase after him.

He was on his feet again before I could get there. His eyes flared with white energy, and he threw his hands out towards me. I couldn't overpower it this time, and I found myself on my back.

"Erus wanted to be a god. I *am* a god where I come from, Landon. When I'm done with you, I'll be a god here as well."

I rolled away from the blast of power that drove a deep hole into the marble floor, spinning fast enough for the momentum to bring me to my feet. I could feel my power growing even now, the spigot opened fully. I skipped towards him, catching his waist with my arms and powering ahead. We blasted through the wall of the Museum together, and out into the street. Except there was no street, just cold, empty ground. The entire world was burning in blue flame, dark clouds, lightning and wind. Malize used my shock to slam my back, knocking me down.

"The Box can't handle this much power," he said, hovering

above me. “You’ll destroy your world In your effort to stop me.”

I had no choice. I shot up at him, my own energy dancing from my fingertips. It lanced out, catching him off-guard. He screamed in pain and recovered, firing back with his own power.

We circled like that, rising up and up into the Box’s atmosphere, into the heavy clouds filled with our warring energy. I strained against the force of his power, and he strained against the force of mine. We traded blows, we ebbed and flowed like the tide. We were evenly matched. Balanced. All of Ross’ power versus all of his.

The world around us began to shake.

“You’ll kill us all, Landon,” Malize said. “Submit, and I’ll spare your life, and Charis’. Of all of your kind, I always intended to keep her safe.”

I felt like I was burning alive, the power coursing through me reaching its upper limits. I was on fire. I was drenched in ice. I was drowning and suffocating and overwhelmed. I couldn’t lose, not like this. We both knew it.

I also couldn’t win.

It was a simple decision, made in the height of my pain and in the desperation of distant hope. I let it go. I let all of it go. I dropped my guard, and his power dug into me, lacing me with pain and forcing every part of my soul to cry out in horror. He stopped attacking, and followed me down as I went into free-fall, riding from the heights towards the welcoming ground below.

I closed my eyes and thought of Josette, her plain face and soft smile, her bright and shining heart of pure goodness.

I thought of Ulnyx, my antagonistic conscience, putting the truth before me and pummeling me with it like a blunt instrument.

I thought of Dante, sending me off from my demise to protect the world from dangers we had all underestimated.

I thought of Sarah, of her strength and resolve, and the battle I hoped she would always win.

I thought of Obi, the truest friend I had ever had.

Last, I thought of Charis. I had never truly loved before. I hadn’t even known what it meant. She had opened my eyes to everything, in more ways than I could count.

There was one other person, one who I had almost forgotten about. I didn’t really know what to make of her, or what to feel or think. She was an afterthought, a piece of my existence I had believed settled.

She was the reason I was going to win.

I hit the ground hard, but I didn't even feel it. Every part of me was already in so much pain, there was nothing left to add. I looked up at Malize, who landed softly at my side and knelt down beside me.

He reached out towards my forehead. "We can only be what we are, Landon."

"I can't believe you fell for that," Rebecca said from behind him.

It was the slightest distraction, but it was what I had been waiting for. I reached up and grabbed Malize's head, twisting it and breaking his neck.

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His body fell on top of me, his eyes still open. I could see the power swimming in them. I could almost hear it calling out to me. Rebecca came and knelt at my side, but I ignored her. I lifted my hand and put it to Malize's forehead.

I touched his power.

I took it in.

"Landon, are you okay?" Rebecca asked. Her voice was far away, and growing more distant.

The entire universe of the Box opened up to me as I connected Ross' power to Malize's. I drew it in, and in doing so was revived. I didn't so much stand up as drift to my feet, and then further upward. I floated into the air once more, into the roiling clouds of wayward energy, into the hurricane of unstable power. I held my arms out and commanded it still, and it responded.

I could see everything now. Every line of power that held the Box together, every calculation, every note. I had sensed Rebecca below me right before I had fallen, and had guessed right that Malize was too concerned with me to notice. Now I could feel

Charis, the dying energy of the demon Samael, and even those who were gathered in a ring around this place. Malize's energy reached into the Box from the clandestine white star at the top of the prison, the astral glow that I had seen but not understood. It connected this universe to that one, and was the secret sauce to his ingress. Take Ross' power, mix it with his own, and carry both out of the Box and into our world. The truth of it was staggering.

The same option was available to me.

The power of a god, or maybe even two. Enough to challenge God, if that was what I desired. It was certainly enough to keep both sides at rest for all of eternity, and I would never need to lift more than a finger to do it.

I looked down to where Rebecca was standing, gazing up at me. I re-ordered the world. I took away the clouds, I took away the emptiness. I put us in Dante's garden, where the roses shifted in the breeze and a trickling brook poured serenity into a small pond. I lowered myself to the ground, walked past Rebecca and into the mansion, to where Charis was waiting for me.

She was kneeling over Clara, cradling her head in her lap.

"What did you do?" she asked me.

"What do you mean? It's over. We won."

"You killed her."

"Ch…" I started to argue, but we'd had this fight already. "I know. I'm sorry. It was the only way."

Her anger lessened. Not her pain, but her anger. "Malize?"

"Gone. The Beast is gone. I can get us out of here. I can do anything, now. I have their power. All of it." It was strange to say. I couldn't even fathom the depths of what I had under my control.

"Can you bring her back?"

I could, in this place. Maybe I could have even made her real out there. What kind of thing would she be? What kind of life would she live?

"No."

She leaned down and kissed Clara's forehead, and then stood. "Where will she go?"

"She'll always be part of us." I put my arms around her, holding her tight while she sobbed into my shoulder. I don't know how much time passed, but eventually she pulled away and wiped her eyes.

"I love you."

“I love you, too.”

We kissed. A simple kiss, basic and plain, a sharing of affection and understanding. I hated that it had to end. I hated the understanding that it gave me.

“Charis… I can’t.”

“You have to.”

“Why?”

“I’m tired, Landon. Finished. I gave everything I had to being a Templar, to protecting the world from the Beast. Only, it wasn’t just the Beast, was it? Everything I was fighting for was a lie.”

“You mean Malize? Without him, Ross would have destroyed everything a long time ago. He told me he wanted to make God fight, but He does fight. He fights with the free will He gave His creations. He allows us to make our own decisions, and forge our own destiny. Malize knew he might lose. Hell, he gave me everything I needed to defeat him. He had to maintain the balance if he wanted to stay hidden until the last moment.”

As I said it, I wasn’t so sure. Maybe Malize had intended to lose. Maybe, like Abaddon, he had lived beyond his desire, but couldn’t bring himself to make his own end.

“I’m glad you stopped him, Landon. I’m proud of you. I just…” She didn’t know what to say, but she didn’t need to say it. I saw it in her eyes. I heard it in Abaddon’s voice, and in Erus’. For a few eternal life was a gift. For most, it was a curse.

“You’ll still have me,” I said. It was a weak attempt to change her mind, but it was all I had.

“You don’t have to go back,” she replied. “It can end for you, too. The fighting, the loss, the hurt. You’ve done your part. You saved the world.”

Maybe if I hadn’t seen what Clara had shown me. The death, the destruction. Maybe if I had been more selfish, or more experienced, or more tired. Maybe if my judgement weren’t clouded by the power of a god, or my eyes opened with the clarity of one.

“I do,” I said. “Someone has to.”

She looked down. “I’m sorry.”

I picked her chin up with my hand. “Don’t be. You saved the world, Charis. You brought me here. You taught me, you trusted me, you loved me. I know what I’m going back to is anything but peaceful, but every day when the sun rises, I’ll know it was because of you and I. I’ll know that six billion people get their shot at their

hundred years, and then another six billion people after that. I'll help them with you in my heart, and in my soul."

I kissed her forehead. I held my lips there and exerted my will on her.

"Rest now. You've earned it."

"I love you," she said again.

It was the last thing I heard. Her body turned to energy, and the energy swirled around me. First, she would be with Clara here in the Box. Then, she would be free.

I watched her dissipate into the air. Right before she did, I captured a single point of light, and I breathed it in. I pushed it down into my soul, and I trapped it there for all of eternity. I couldn't stand to have our connection completely broken.

She would have agreed.

I stood there for hours, still and silent. I let the tears fall, because I was going to miss her. I let my heart soar, because I was happy she was free. Eventually, Rebecca came into the mansion. She didn't speak to me. She just stood there and waited, her own tears joining at my pain. I never would have expected that.

"It's time to go," I said to her at last.

"Landon, I…"

"I forgive you."

I focused, and a new doorway appeared in the center of the room. The door was mottled wood, and I remembered it from a dream. It was a symbol of struggle, and of hope. I pushed it open.

"Go now, Rebecca."

"Aren't you coming?" she asked.

"Yes, but I have one more thing I need to do first. Tell Sarah I'm proud of her. Tell Dante I'll be in touch. Tell Obi, Adam and Elyse that they have my infinite thanks."

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to." I pointed towards the door.

She walked over to it and paused.

"Landon, I…"

I held up my hand, and she stopped. "Be good, Rebecca."

She smiled, winked at me, and stepped through.

I took a deep breath. I could feel the power coursing through me, the energy sizzling at every tip of my being. I had observed what the thirst for it had done on every level. I had witnessed the death, the pain, the destruction. I had seen it in Josette, in Sarah, in

Ulnyx, in Gervais and Abaddon, Ross and Malize. I was a diuscrucis. One part demon, one part angel, one part human. That meant I was all parts fallible and corruptible.

Such power didn't belong in my hands.

I held it in my soul for a brief moment. I kept a grip on just enough, and I let the rest go. I pushed it all out into the Box, a Box that I knew couldn't hold it. It didn't need to.

I walked over to the door, took one last look back, and fixed the world.

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“Are you ready?”

I pursed my lips and stared into the white light in front of me. Master Lu was standing on my right, dressed in the plain gray robes of the House of Life.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

It had been nearly a month since we had freed Landon from the Box. At least, I could only assume he had been freed. The last I had seen of him was right before stepping through the doorway back to the Beast’s prison, and rejoining those who had been waiting on the outside. I had waited for him there with the others, only to have it all vanish in a flash of light. The Box, the star, even the prison itself. We had found ourselves back in Gervais’ chateau, left to wonder what exactly had happened.

It had only been his words to me, words I shared with the others, which brought us any comfort. They weren’t the words of someone who was gone for good. They were the words of someone who needed a break and time to heal their battle scars, who would overcome their grief and loss and return stronger and more resolved

than ever.

We'd gone our separate ways then. Dante had returned to Purgatory, bringing a reluctant Alichino with him. Adam had gone back to Heaven to report on the fate of the swords that his Inquisitors had been hunting for so long. Elyse had expressed her need to return to Japan, to a family estate that she could only hope had avoided Gervais' attentions, where she planned to regroup and come to some kind of closure on the death of her father and her status in the Nicht Creidim.

Obi was going to return to New York, but Sarah had wanted to stay, and so he had stayed, naming himself her guardian in Landon's absence. She wanted time to mourn the loss of her friend and mentor, and to deal with the power her father had unlocked with her fury. The chateau was probably hers anyway. I couldn't imagine that any Divine would lay claim to it any time soon, especially if word got out about what she had done to the archfiend.

I had remained a spirit from the moment I had used Elyse to pass along Landon's message until I had been drawn back across the world to the small monastery in China, run by one of the oldest angels on Earth. The world was safe from the Beast and the one called Malus. Landon was free. I had accomplished my mission. I had earned my redemption.

Master Lu had known I was coming. I don't know how, but he knew. He had a volunteer waiting for me, a new initiate to the House who he had yet to gift with the Touch. She was no more than twelve, and her memories were so simple and so pure. After all I had been through and witnessed, it was hard to keep myself from weeping at the beauty of them. I was sure she would make a good monk.

I stared into the white light and shuddered. I was nervous, excited, and afraid. I remembered what the other spirit had said to me. I knew there was a possibility my road to Heaven would end here, at least for now. Still, I was hopeful. I hadn't saved a kitten from a tree, after all.

"Step into the light, child," Master Lu said. "Bare your soul to the Heavenly Host, and allow them to make their judgement."

I held my breath, trying to calm my pounding heart. There was no sense in delaying.

Be good.

It was the last thing Landon had said to me. I had my flaws, but for better or worse, Heaven or not, that was what I was going to do.

Be good.

My host's feet carried me forward until I was inside the light, surrounded by it so that I saw nothing but a field of bright emptiness. I wasn't sure what was supposed to happen, but I felt a warmth surround me for a fleeting instant and then retreat.

I stepped out of the light.

Master Lu was smiling at me. A comforting, gentle smile.

Be good.

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45

I watched the waves roll across the beach. It was early morning on a clear day. A crisp breeze was blowing from the north. The sun would be coming up soon.

I hadn't missed a single sunrise in the three months since I had gotten out of the Box. Even when it was cloudy or raining I would come out here, I would look in the direction I knew it to be, and I would smile. It wasn't just because it meant humanity got one more day, it was also because I knew Charis was out there somewhere, and in a sense so was Clara.

I had made myself a new body, a replica of what I had lost, but no longer a thing of the Divine. I had taken the Box, and I had brought it with me to this remote place, unseen by those gathered in the Beast's prison. I had left the doorway open, and I had pushed it up into the stars, where the energy would leak out and become a smaller part of the thread that wove this universe to all of the other universes. Then I had stretched out in the sand below those stars and cried myself to sleep.

I had done the same every day for eighty-one days, alone with

my thoughts, my grief, and my joy. I had seen the potentials of my future in the despair of the Beast, but in the end I rejected them. I wasn't him, and he wasn't me. I was free to choose, and my choice was to stick with the hope and the unbreakable spirit that made every single member of mankind capable of rising up to do great things. My plan wasn't so much to be their protector, as it was to help them learn to protect themselves. The Nicht Creidim weren't right, but they weren't completely wrong either. There had to be a balance there, somewhere.

In the end, if I taught them, and I helped them, then the loss of one diuscrucis would never be enough to break the world. It would never be enough to break the will and the spirit.

The game was over. We had won.

A new game would start soon.

I was ready.

THE END OF SERIES ONE.

Thank you for reading! Did you know there's a second three book series that follows Landon's continuing adventures as the world's only Diuscrucis? Pick up Evolution and keep reading.

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Book Five: Evolution

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1

In the beginning, there was God. Nobody knows where He came from. All any of us know is that He was there. That He has always been there.

After God came the seraphim, the angels. His warriors. His army. He created them for a special purpose.

He made them to fight the Beast: a foreign creature from another place, another universe, another thread of all that is. The Beast begged for succor from Him, and in His goodness He granted it.

Until the Beast lost his mind.

Until the Beast tried to destroy all that He had made.

From the defeat of the Beast rose the greatest of the seraphim, Lucifer, and in his shadow was another, the angel Malize.

Only he wasn't an angel after all…

The universe demands balance in all things, and the goodness of God is no exception.

Lucifer turned on Him, betrayed Him, and was cast down.

To keep the balance, Hell was made.

To keep the balance, Purgatory soon followed.

From his new place in the underworld, Lucifer lusted after what He

had created. Lusted to create life of his own. Lusted to destroy what He had made.

The demons were born.

The war began.

The demons came to the Earth to spread chaos and destruction. The angels descended from Heaven to fight them.

To keep the balance.

Millennia passed.

The war raged on.

Mankind evolved, blossomed, were fruitful and multiplied. The world became theirs, or so they thought. Beneath it all the war continued. Beneath it all the balance rested, a universe poised on the edge of a needle.

One good push to send it to the arms of the demons, the enslavement of man, the ravage of the Earth.

One good push to bring the faithful to their maker, all others left behind in the wake of the Rapture, no more than fodder for the things that remain.

My name is Landon Hamilton.

Once, I was nothing more than a man.

Once, I was a diuscrucis: my soul a perfect balance of human, demon, and angel descent. I was a warrior of Purgatory, a champion for mankind.

Once, I fought a god and won.

Once, I was a god myself.

That was the past, and the past is behind me.

Today, my name is Landon Hamilton. I am not a man, not a god, not an angel or a demon, not even diuscrucis, though the title remains mine.

I'm just Landon.

A grizzled veteran. An old dog with some new tricks.

The war rages on.

The balance must be kept.

The future of humanity depends on it. Depends on me.

Depends on us.

If you've found this. If you're reading this. If you can see these words and understand them. If you want to join the fight…

Find me.

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2

The winter wind cut through the channels between skyscrapers, pummeling against my left side, pushing my short hair into a weird non-bald combover, and snapping the unzipped front of my coat against my hip. I could feel the push of it, and hear the whistle against my ears.

I was glad I didn't feel the cold.

It was late, three in the morning. The city wasn't asleep. This city never slept. It was quiet though, most of the throng consisting of late-night partiers, people walking their dogs, that sort of thing. I maneuvered around them without paying them much attention. I was one of them, and at the same time nothing like them.

I passed the corner of a stone facade and peered down the dark alley. My stomach rumbled a complaint, a reminder that I needed to eat. I hoped the noise wouldn't give me away.

I kept walking.

It took three more blocks before they came, six in all, one from another alley, two from across the street, and three from the rooftop on my left. It was a long fall, but they could take it. They were

demons.

Vampires.

“Lost, stranger?” their apparent leader asked.

He was clean-cut, in khakis and a polo shirt. I remembered seeing him at the bar. He must have used the street over to come past and double-back. I wasn’t surprised. It was typical.

Two years since I had held the power of a god in my hands.

Two years since I had rejected it.

Two years since I had been reborn, no longer a creature of the Divine.

It was strange that these were the situations that always made me reflective, that always brought me back to the memories of Charis and Clara, my wife and daughter. I couldn’t help thinking about them that way, even if Charis and I had never actually been married, never even been intimate. Even if Clara had been nothing more than a construction of the prison we had been trapped in together, a manifestation of our power. A feedback loop, in a sense. I suppose it was because the ghosts of them reminded me why I was still here. Of why I had stayed behind.

“I asked you if you were lost,” the vamp repeated. He was confident, and why wouldn’t he be? I was surrounded.

They didn’t have their claws out, not yet. I was sure they thought they were dealing with just another mortal, a piece of meat, my age and lean frame suggesting I didn’t carry the taint of the Beast’s power that had poisoned half of their food supply.

Two years ago, they would have seen me as an angel, or a demon. Maybe they would have even known who I was. Those days were gone. They had died with Charis and Clara. I was different now.

Re-made.

“I know exactly where I am.”

Polo looked at his cronies, slightly confused by my unexpected confidence. There was no way for them to know what I looked like, who I was.

“Bind his hands and frisk him,” Polo said at last, motioning with his fingers. “If your blood is clean, you’ll make a nice meal.”

I put my hands behind my back, holding them together to make the binding easier.

“What are you doing?” Polo asked. His voice was a little shaky. Unsure. Most people didn’t volunteer to be vamp food.

I felt a pair of rough hands take my wrists.

I had given up the Divine power. That didn't mean I was powerless.

I shifted my weight, twisting and pulling the vampire behind me, swinging him like a meat hammer and throwing him into his partner on my left. They fell into a tangled heap, even as the others hissed and bared their teeth and claws, their eyes fading to an empty black.

They came at me.

I fell into a defensive crouch, keeping my eyes trained on Polo and watching the others in the periphery. The vamp was a blur from my left, and I caught his arm in my left hand and his chest in my right. I used his own mass and inertia against him, changing his direction and burying him into the cement.

His neck broke with a wet crack.

I ducked down, reaching into my pocket and turning again, throwing my hand out towards an incoming opponent. He found himself impaled on a four foot obsidian roman spatha, covered in both demonic runes and seraphim scripture. It slid easily between his ribs and out his back, and I wrenched it free and sent it away. It left me holding a small black stone, and I clutched it while I rolled to the right, avoiding the falling vampire as he steamed frankincense and died. I came up with the blade in hand once more.

I was greeted with a single mass of teeth and claws, the remaining vampires throwing all of their energy into taking me down. Their attack was organized and ferocious. They knew what they were doing. They knew how to fight.

I had once held the soul of a centuries-old angel within my own. All of her memories, all of her knowledge had been mine. She had been an intimate part of me, a confidant and friend. Even though Josette was gone, those memories still lingered, still resonated in my mind.

They didn't stand a chance.

One took the obsidian blade in the heart, another got stabbed in the gut, and a third tried to run away. I threw the spatha, catching him in the back. He fell to the pavement and burned to ash.

I left Polo alone until then, grabbing him by the throat and throwing him against a wall. He hit it hard and slid to the ground, his claws retracting, his fearful eyes going back to their normal brown. "Diuscrucis?" he guessed, a little too late.

“I’m looking for Randolph.”

“Hearst? Why?”

“He’s been trying to regroup the Solen family.”

They had once been the strongest vampire family in the northeast, until their patriarch, Merov, had picked a fight with his daughter and lost. The family had gone to her, and she had gone to Hell, leaving them rudderless.

Rebecca.

She was the reason the Beast had been freed. She was also part of the reason he’d been defeated. I hadn’t thought about her in the two years since.

Not until recently, anyway. Not until I had discovered that Merov’s former accountant was making a move to get himself installed at the front of what remained of the Solen family. He had to know that kind of work would catch my attention.

He was probably counting on it. If he had any idea who I was, or where I was, he would have just given me a call, or sent me a postcard. The Divine only saw me as a human now. It made it easy to blend in, to disappear.

“They won’t accept him,” Polo said. “He’s a bean counter, not an alpha. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Are you defending him?”

“N…. No. I know Hearst. He’s a salesman. He always has an angle.”

“That’s why I need to talk to him. Why does his angle include me?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Do you know where I can find him?”

Polo’s eyes darted around, as if he expected him to step out of the darkness. “He likes the strip clubs. ‘Inventory’, he calls it. Try the Penthouse.”

His expression changed. He was afraid before, but now that he had told me what I wanted to know, he was terrified. His hands moved against the cement, scrambling to push himself further away from me.

I wasn’t going to kill him. There was no point.

I turned and walked away, stopping only to recover the spatha and return it to its resting place. I wasn’t worried about Polo telling anyone he had seen me, or that he knew what I looked like. Soon after he left my sight and I left his, he would forget all about me.

It had been one of Malize's abilities, and I had been smart to claim it for my own when I had been reborn. The anonymity gave me time to rest, to recover, and to think, without the worry of being assaulted by demons, or harassed by angels. It let me stay hidden and secure. It made me close to impossible to find.

At the same time, it kept me closer to the people I was protecting. It let me feel more human, because I could always be myself. I knew from the Beast it was the secret to keeping the balance. He forgot who he was, what he was fighting for. I couldn't afford to let that happen to me. I could still see the destruction his failure had caused. I could still feel the emptiness. When he lost the one he loved, he lost it all. I had lost the ones I loved, and I had survived. It wasn't always easy, and there were times when it hurt as though it had just happened, but I refused to give in. It was the responsibility I had taken, the job I had accepted. If I couldn't keep some kind of balance in myself, it wasn't just me that suffered.

I closed my eyes, an image of Charis and Clara materializing in the corners of the darkness. I had survived, because somebody had to. I had survived so that she could spread among the stars, knowing that she hadn't failed.

I looked up into the night sky, those same stars barely visible through the clouds. Maybe one day I would join her there, when mankind was strong enough to defend itself from the war between Heaven and Hell.

One day, but not today.

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3

The Penthouse was short for the Penthouse Executive Club. It was a higher-end so-called ‘Gentleman’s’ club over on 11th and 45th, not far from where the Intrepid was docked. Even though I’d never been in it, I knew where it was. I knew where everything was in this town.

I watched the front from across the street, bathed in the shadows of a dark corner. I could still hear the wind in my ears, and feel it brushing my hair. Across from me, a line of limos waited at the entrance to the club, their drivers standing patiently on the passenger side, ready to accept their charges the moment they made a break from the doors. Like me, they seemed to be immune to the cold.

For some, it was because of layers of clothes beneath pressed and fitted tuxedos and wool overcoats.

For others, it was because they weren’t human.

I couldn’t sense Divine anymore, not in a soul-tickling expression of heat and cold, Heaven and Hell. What I could do was See them, the way even the weakest Awake human could. Looking

at them, I knew them for what they were. Out of five cars and five drivers, there was one Turned, a human who had sold their soul to a demon for power, and one vampire, leaning up against the hood of a classic Rolls and looking smug.

I could guess which car belonged to Hearst.

It was three in the morning, and the club would be closing soon. There was no good reason to go inside and risk the mortals there. Instead, I watched the thin flow of pedestrians, the people coming and going from the club, and the movements of the drivers. When I caught a break in the action, I stepped out of the shadows and headed for the vamp. As I walked, the jacket and jeans I was wearing reorganized into a crisp tuxedo and overcoat, a facsimile of the chauffeur's standard dress.

"Hey, buddy," I said, walking right up to the vamp. He didn't move much, shifting his eyes left so he could see me.

"Do you need something?" He was tall and thin, and he had a soft look to him. I stared at him for a few seconds. He wasn't pure.

When the Beast had been freed from his prison, his power had begun leaking out into the world at large. This power had infiltrated mankind, seeping down into their souls, and affecting anyone with even the smallest amount of Divine ancestry, which was a much larger pool than would be expected. Some got sick and died. Some were unaffected. Some were oblivious, and at the same time became poisonous to Lucifer's creations, who needed human blood to survive.

A few, less than one percent, changed.

What they changed into depended on the ancestry, and in the vast majority of cases, that meant demons of one kind or another. After all, it was the fiends and vampires and weres who were the rapists. God discouraged His angels from consorting with mankind, and as far as I knew there was only one mortal who had inherited angelic traits.

He was in France, smitten with my sister.

"Cold night," I said.

Now he turned his head. "I'm not in the mood for small talk, *buddy* ."

The last word came out like a curse.

"Me neither."

I had my arm around his shoulder before he could react, turning him so that we weren't as obvious to the other drivers. I hit him

hard on the side of the head, right at the temple, supporting his weight as he lost consciousness. A real demon would never go out that easy. I half-dragged, half-carried him around to the rear of the car, holding and chatting at him like we were old friends. He hung limp in my arms, and I found the keys in his pocket and opened the trunk. I watched the other drivers to make sure they weren't paying attention, and then quickly dumped him in. I slammed the trunk shut and leaned against it for a few minutes, making sure nobody noticed the switch. When everything stayed quiet, I circled to the driver's side and positioned myself behind the wheel.

I checked myself in the mirror, adjusting the cap so it was lower over my gray eyes, creating a shadow that would disguise me for about three seconds. It was all the time I would need to make sure that Hearst hadn't brought a bodyguard.

Then I waited.

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4

I didn't wait long.

The back door of the Rolls swung open, and Randolph Hearst dropped onto the seat. I glanced over, not seeing anyone with him, while he pulled the door closed.

"What the hell am I feeding you for, eh?" he asked. "You're supposed to get the goddamned-"

"Randolph."

Hearst smiled. "Landon. I was wondering when you would get my messages."

He was old, with thin white hair and plenty of wrinkles. Every time I saw him, he reminded me of my Uncle Luther, kind and easy to underestimate. I knew Hearst liked that impression, because he wasn't the strongest specimen, and he didn't need to be. He knew how to manipulate, and he knew where to stick the knife when your back was turned. It made him a lot more dangerous than Merov ever was.

"Sending your boys out kidnapping drunks late at night… It isn't your most original move."

He laughed. “I would have stopped by, but nobody seems to know where you live. Anyway, simple is always better, and I needed to make sure you would ask questions first.”

His voice was rough, with a heavy New York accent. He would have made a great Godfather.

“Instead of just killing you?”

“Better that you don’t even try.”

“Pulling the Solen family back together isn’t the way to do that.”

“Trust me when I say that you’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“I take it that’s the reason you wanted to talk?”

“It is.” He looked out the window. “Since you seem to have incapacitated my driver, would you mind taking me home? I’m sure you already know I had Merov’s old place remodeled.”

“Why not?” Once I was gone, he would remember we had talked. He wouldn’t remember where or when.

“You’re a true gentleman.”

I started the car and eased it out into the street. “So, talk.”

“Have you ever heard of Matthias Zheng?”

“I can’t say I have.”

“He’s a third generation Chinese-American. He got his doctorate in engineering at Stanford, before moving on to doing government work at a lab in New Mexico. From what my people have been able to learn, the startup was working on some kind of advanced robotics project for the military.”

I laughed. “Since when do vampires care about what any government’s military is doing?”

“I don’t care about the military. I care about Matthias Zheng. By all accounts, the guy is a genius, maybe even as smart as me.” He followed it up with a dark cackle. “He’s been seen talking to the enemy.”

“The angels? He’s Touched?”

“Not according to my sources. Just a regular guy, same as you appear to be. Obviously, looks can be deceiving.”

“I’m a special case.”

“Maybe you aren’t as special as you think you are. Anyway, you know Valerix?”

“The west coast archfiend? She’s been quiet for a while.” When a powerful demon like her was quiet, it meant they were up to no good. By telling Randolph that I’d noticed, I was suggesting I was keeping a close eye on her.

“She was the one who told me that I needed to find you, and give you the tip. If an archfiend is worried about it, there has to be something to it, no?”

“Or it could be a setup.”

Hearst laughed. “How the hell are we going to set you up? We don’t even know how to find you since all that bullshit with the Beast.”

I turned my head to look back at him. “That only means you have to try harder. I’m not an idiot, Randolph. Getting me to come to you would be step one in any play.”

He put his hands out, trying to look innocent. Like a vampire could ever look innocent. “She wanted me to tell you about Zheng, I told you about Zheng. You know me, Landon. I’m a survivor. I’m not going to start with the likes of you without some serious odds, and they just aren’t there, not yet, anyway.”

I couldn’t argue his logic. Since he wasn’t gifted with brute power, he had to be willing to be patient and highly calculating in his approach to gaining his share of the pie. I was still too much of an unknown quantity for him to take that kind of risk.

“You gave me a name and suggested he’s a fan of God. You haven’t told me everything you know.”

“Astute, as always. Valerix said she sent a succubus over to the apartment building where he lives and set her up as a neighbor. She put the full moves on him, and he waved her off like some kind of mosquito or something. So, she thought maybe he likes boys. Nothing. He’s immune to demonic power.”

I glanced back at him again. It wasn’t possible for someone to be immune and not be Divine.

Not unless they were like me.

“Kind of a kick in the ass, isn’t it?” he asked. “There’s something going on out west, diuscrucis. The angels have been quiet for the last two years, letting you clean up the mess the Beast made and get things right again. That’s two years they’ve had to plan, to prepare. To destroy us… or to destroy you?”

Or both.

“If you want more information, you’ll have to talk to Valerix.” He reached into the pocket of his suit jacket and held out a slip of paper. “Her address. She’ll be expecting you to stop by at some point.”

I took it. It felt like it could be a setup, but the idea that there

was someone else out there with immunity to the Divine, who was working with the angels… it was a curiosity, and I was feeling very curious.

"I'm sure you know the rest of the way," I said, stopping the car in the middle of the street. We were still a good ten blocks from Merov's penthouse uptown.

"Where are you going?" Randolph asked.

"You were told to deliver a message, and you delivered it. I'm going to see what I can find out." I opened the door and stepped out. I leaned back in and looked at the vampire. "Watch yourself, Randolph. Putting the family back together… it's dangerous."

He scowled at me, clearly unhappy with his choice to either walk the rest of the way home, or have to drive himself. "You know I stay on the right side of caution."

I slammed the door closed and started walking back the way we'd come. I did know that.

It was the reason I was nervous.

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My current home was the corner unit of a crappy apartment in the theater district. It was a nondescript, unassuming little hole in the wall that was marked only by a small etched address in the cornerstone and a never-locked door that allowed access into the building. It was as standard as they came, and it was the truest meaning of ‘hiding in plain sight’.

I made my way into the small, mailbox-lined foyer, and then through the second door into the main stairwell. It was coming up on four-thirty, and everything else around me was dark and silent. I put my hand over my stomach while it rumbled again, and then started the climb up to my tenth floor apartment. I could have taken the elevator, but it was old and cranky, and wouldn’t do much to keep me from drawing the neighbors’ attention.

I reached the top of the steps and rounded the bannister, finding myself looking down the familiar hallway, with its fairly new striped carpeting, and persistent smell of wet paint, even though it hadn’t seen a fresh coat in at least ten years.

I paused when I noticed my door was cracked open.

Who would be at my place this time of morning? There were only three people who even knew where I lived. Dante would never go through the door, Elyse was on a run in South Africa, and Obi knew better than to just drop by.

It was another curiosity.

I resumed my walk, keeping my pace steady. The quarters were too close here for the sword to be of much use, so I found the stem of my power in the base of my soul and stretched it like elastic through my body, into my muscles, enhancing and extending my strength and speed. It was enough to give my hundred and sixty pound form the juice to keep up with the Divine.

I reached my door and put my palm to it, spending a few seconds listening before I pushed it open, the heavy creaking of the stiff hinges giving anyone inside plenty of warning that I was coming in. I stepped over the threshold and paused, taking in the air.

Perfume?

My apartment could only be described as spartan. I had a bedroom with a mattress on the floor, and living room with a sofa and desk I'd bought at Goodwill. A couple of towels and some standard toiletries rested in the bathroom, and a fridge with a freezer full of ice cream, an unused stove, and not much else defined the kitchen. To most, it would have been kind of pathetic, but I didn't need much. Clothes weren't an issue, and I didn't watch television. I kept my laptop hidden in the ceiling when I wasn't around, and the rest of the inventory was in a rented storage unit in the basement.

A purse was sitting on the corner of the sofa.

The faucet was running in the bathroom.

Whoever it was, they were female, and not very smart. The running water would have masked my entrance. I stepped quietly over to the bathroom door and pressed myself against the wall. The faucet stopped, I heard hands against the towel, and then the door began to swing open, leaving me behind it.

I saw her through the crack. Medium height, shoulder length brown hair with a modern cut. Narrow build and a chest that was out of proportion to it. She was wearing a maroon sweater and a pair of jeans.

She wasn't Divine.

When she saw the door had been pushed open, she produced a

gun from under the sweater, moving with the confidence of someone who had plenty of practice with firearms.

I shoved the bathroom door closed behind her, catching her wrist as she spun and tried to aim, pinching the nerve and forcing the weapon to crack against the linoleum floor.

“I would have knocked, but I live here. Who are you?”

She had brown eyes, and a pretty face. Her face tightened at the same time she tried to punch me in the jaw. I let the strike land, and kept looking at her without reacting. She threw a kick at my knee, and I shifted just enough. It landed on my leg, hard enough to leave a bruise that would heal in a couple of seconds.

I let go of her wrist.

“It really isn’t polite to attack someone in their own home,” I said.

She didn’t speak. She went for the gun, picking it up and putting it to my chest. I didn’t try to stop her. She couldn’t hurt me like that.

“Can we talk about-“

The pop of the gun made my ears ring. I felt the bullet rip into and through me, coming out of my back and planting itself in the wall. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, feeling the energy wrapping around the wound and putting everything back in place. I’d felt pain a thousand times worse than being shot.

She dropped the gun and stepped back.

“Holy shit,” she said, speaking for the first time. “You mean it’s true?”

“That it isn’t polite to attack someone in their own house? It’s normally considered good etiquette.”

She kept backing up. I picked up her sidearm and held it out to her.

“What if it wasn’t true?” I asked. I had an idea what she meant. “I would be dead on the floor right now.”

“This can’t be real,” she said. “It can’t be.” She blinked her eyes a few times.

“You came here for a reason.” How did she find me? How did she know who or what I was? What the hell was going on?

“I… I…”

“Do you have a name?”

“Rosita. Rosita Marquez. You can call me Rose.” She reached the corner of the sofa and flopped down onto it, next to her bag.

“Please don’t kill me.”

“Why would I do that?” My stomach grumbled again. “I’m going to get some ice cream from the fridge. You want a spoon?”

Her eyes followed me into the small kitchen. When I re-made myself, I took back most of the characteristics that defined who I was before I died, traits that put me closer to being human than a soldier of Purgatory. That included hunger and thirst, and a desire to sleep even if there wasn’t much of a need. It kept me grounded, helped me remember what I was doing this for, and as a side effect returned my vicious love of ice cream, now exacerbated by the fact that I could eat however much I wanted and not gain weight.

I put the gun down in the sink, found a half-gallon of mint chip in the freezer, pulled a pair of spoons from a stiff drawer, and rejoined Ms. Rosita Marquez, whoever she was, on the couch.

“Spoon?” I asked, holding it out to her. I sat next to her, far enough so we weren’t touching, close enough that she could help herself to the snack.

She reached out slowly, taking it from me as if I were offering her poison. Her eyes stayed glued to mine.

“You’re Landon Hamilton?”

“Yes. How do you know that name?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I can’t believe I found you.”

I took a spoonful of ice cream, stuck it in my mouth, and stared at her.

She reached up and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m crazy. I’m sorry for shooting you.” She stuck her spoon into the ice cream, taking a small bite. “Like I said, my name is Rosita Marquez. My sister was Anita Marquez. We were twins…”

I swallowed and put up my hand. “Please, Rosita. Let’s start at the middle. How do you know who I am?”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her voice was smooth and flat, projecting someone else’s words from memory. “If you’ve found this. If you’re reading this. If you can see these words and understand them. If you want to join the fight. Find me.”

I stared at her, feeling my body go numb. Obi had helped me create the web site on the deep net nearly two years ago. It was the pot of gold at the end of a long, twisted rainbow. A test of mettle intended to bring the right kind of people into the war, the first step in my goal to bolster the ranks of my rebellion and add the fault-

tolerance that the Beast had lacked.

Two years, and no one had ever found me.

Two years, and no one had ever found the site.

I'd given up on it, forgotten about it, accepted that the Awake didn't want to fight. That mankind just wasn't ready.

Until today.

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“I can’t believe you found it,” I said. My hands were trembling, the ice cream rocking like a ship in a storm. “Who are you?”

“I told you, my name-“

“No, I mean… Who *are* you?”

“I was trying to tell you. This whole thing is very strange.”

“You know about the Divine?”

“I know about demons.” She reached into her bag and pulled out her cell. She turned it on and opened up a photo of her standing next to an identical version that could only be her sister. They even had the same breast implants. “My sister, Anita. She was killed by one, sixteen months ago.”

I started to take another spoonful of ice cream before I remembered myself. Sometimes it was easy to forget what empathy was. I put it aside, close enough for her to reach if she wanted some. I put my own appetite on hold.

“I’m sorry. Tell me.”

“Anita and I both went to school at MIT. We were getting our degrees in engineering. I was supposed to meet her in the library

after class, when she sent me a text that she met the most gorgeous guy. She said she was leaving the library early so she could go home and change, that some guy named Jonathan was going to be picking her up at seven. They were going to have dinner together at a local restaurant. Just a date, you know?"

"I didn't think anything of it at the time. I wrote her back and told her I was happy she met someone, and that I would see her later. If we weren't going to meet to study, I thought I would go back to the lab and put some extra time in."

I didn't need a degree from MIT to know where this was going. "She never came home?"

"Not exactly. She never left home. Anita and I were renting a house together off-campus. She was smart enough not to tell him where she lived. She was smart enough to keep the date local, and public. He must have followed her, or something."

Her eyes began to fill with tears again, running down her cheeks and dripping onto the sweater as she spoke. "I got home around ten. At first, I didn't think she was there." Her face started to flush, and she looked down at the floor. "Then I heard her moaning, and I thought that maybe the date had just gone better than she expected. Except… there was something wrong about it. Its a little embarrassing, but I had heard her with other guys before, and we were twins, so I just knew…

"I ran upstairs, screaming her name. The moaning stopped. She came out of her bedroom just as I was coming up. She was dressed in her exercise clothes, and she was sweaty. She closed the door behind her. 'What's the matter with you, Rosie?' she asked me. 'I thought you were in trouble,' I said. Then she laughed. It sounded like her, but it was… I don't know… off. There was something about it. 'I'm going for a run,' she said, and she went down the stairs and left."

She shook her head and wiped at her eyes with the sweater. She was still sobbing pretty hard. "I went back downstairs to get something to eat, but I couldn't shake the feeling of wrongness. The moans I heard… it wasn't that kind of exercise, you know? I always respected my sister's privacy, and she respected mine… I got this fear in me, and I ran back up and opened her door. Anita was there, on the bed. Her face was in one piece, her eyes and mouth open like she was in the middle of the world's greatest orgasm."

She looked at me, the tears rolling from her eyes, her voice

shaking, her arms covered in goosebumps.

"The rest of her… There was blood all over the sheets, enough that it was running down and dripping onto the floor. Her body was cut open from her vagina to her sternum. Whatever that thing was, it had been chewing on her lungs when I came up, and there were other parts that were already gone."

She stopped talking, turned her head, and threw up. I watched it splatter on the floor, and then silently got up and made my way into the bathroom to grab a towel so she could clean herself.

I knew my demons. The sex part sounded like an incubus. Eating the organs? A hellhound might feed on a body that way. I didn't know of anything else that would.

Then there was the fact that it took on her sister's appearance. The weres could shift from a quasi-animal form to full human, and a number of demons could cast a glamour that would make them look like someone else to mortals and less powerful Divine. They didn't get the memories of the person they glamoured, and they wouldn't be able to fool their victim's twin, not even for a second.

There was nothing that could do that. At least, nothing I had ever heard of before.

It was a day for curiosities.

I grabbed a couple of towels from the small bathroom, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I did. Sometimes it was a surprise to me to see that I still looked human. Sometimes I had to look to remind myself that I was. I stared at myself, not really paying attention to my tousled hair or my lean, slightly weathered face. I focused on my eyes, bright gray eyes that were wholly unique to me in all of the universe. Eyes that belied the threads of power that coursed within my soul beneath them. They were different. They were also human.

I took a deep breath, blinked a few times, and headed back towards the living room.

She was sitting back against the couch when I returned, her eyes puffy and her nose still running. I handed her the towel, and she used it to wipe the wayward vomit from her face. I took a second towel and draped it over the mess on the floor.

"I'm sorry. It's just…"

I sat down next to her and put my arm on her shoulder. "I'm sorry about what happened to your sister. I need to know… how can you be sure it was a demon?"

She let out a dark, heavy laugh.

“Are you kidding? I didn’t know what to do, what to think, so I called the police. Things got worse then, because they couldn’t see what had been done to her. Her body was ripped open, and they said she had been stabbed. I told them that whoever did it had taken her appearance, and they wanted to send me in for blood work, like I was on drugs or something. Then they talked to a neighbor, who swore they saw one of us leave the house in a sports bra and yoga pants, and they arrested me as a suspect! The only reason I got out was because they put the time of death at seven thirty. I was in the lab at that time, and had the video to prove it. That little paradox still has them confused. Anyway, there’s a detective assigned to the case, but as far as they’re concerned it’s cold as ice.”

She wiped at her eyes again, her sadness slowly receding into steely anger. “I knew what I had seen, and I knew there was no reasonable way to explain it. Something had killed my sister, and her loss, the emptiness… it was tearing me apart just like she had been. I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t think. The only thing I could think to do was try to find out what had really happened, to find whatever had done this. I went online, I did some research. I discovered SamChan, and then I started seeing things about angels and demons, crazy shit about vampires and werewolves and a war. There was this guy there, Oblitrix, always asking people if they’d witnessed anything strange like that. Part of me thought he was crazy, but after what I had seen I knew he wasn’t. I knew the stuff he was talking about was really out there, and Anita was a victim of it.

“I dropped out of school, and ever since I’ve spent every waking hour of every day trying to find any leads I can on the thing that killed her. I also started training. I took classes in martial arts, guns, archery, anything I could think of. If I was going to find the demon, I had to be able to fight it, right? I also wrote to Oblitrix to ask him what he knew. He sent me a code.”

“The code led you to me.”

“Indirectly. It was a cipher, and not an easy one to break. It took months.”

“It was meant to see how badly you wanted it.”

“Now you know how bad.” She wiped the excess tears away.

“I do. What I don’t know is what you’re hoping to achieve by

being here."

"I wrote a program to start tracking murders that matched the description of Anita's. I got a hit or two every week going back about two years, all in the New England area. I found your site last week, with another cipher pointing to this apartment. I was nervous about coming here, afraid that what I had read was true, and at the same time hoping it was. When I picked up another hit here in Manhattan, I knew I had to come. Now I find out everything I was reading, everything you wrote is true? You took a bullet and then offered me ice cream."

She held up her cell again, so I could look at the picture of her with her sister.

"Anita was taken from me, from this world, way too soon. Other girls are being murdered. I know you can help me find the demon that's killing them."

I stared at her. After the Beast, I'd decided that the best way to help mankind was to teach them to help themselves. Now my first student was sitting right in front of me, and I could feel the anxiety and doubt creeping into my soul. Would I be doing the right thing to drag her into this? If she died or worse, and it was likely, would it be my fault? Was I ready to accept that responsibility?

"You know my fight isn't just a fight against Hell? There are demons, lots of them, but there are angels, too. They're the furthest thing from evil, and at the same time the death of humanity rests in their devotion, just as much as it does the Devil's chaos. If you want me to help you, you need to become part of that world, that fight, that war. You need to be ready to kill both sides. It isn't just about your sister. Thousands died in Mumbai because of the Beast. Thousands more have lost who they were. You made the effort to find me, now you need to decide. If I help you, my fight becomes your fight. There's no other way. If you can't accept those terms, the door is over there."

She didn't blink. She didn't sigh. She didn't waste a breath.

"I found you. I know what you're about. I'm here. You need me to sign something in blood?"

"No. No blood. It wouldn't be binding anyway."

I spent the next two hours getting Rose up to speed on the most current events. I gave her a basic rundown of what I knew about demons, and how I had never heard of one that met her description. The timing was a concern to me, because according to her the

attacks started not long after the Beast was freed, which suggested we were dealing with a changeling of some kind. I didn't think any new demon types had been born from the damage. Then again, I didn't know everything.

Once that was done, I left her on the couch and went to bed.

I didn't need to sleep right now to stay strong and alert.

I needed it so I could dream.

In my dreams, I saw Charis and Clara the most often. They would be waiting for me in a sea of grass and flowers, a picnic blanket spread out, the sun shining. It was wholly cliche, and somehow that made it more real, and more comforting. We would eat and play games. I would chase Clara through the field, picking her up and tickling her when she was caught. I would sit with Charis' head on my lap and stroke her hair, and stare down into her eyes.

It brought me peace.

Other times, I would be walking the city alone, and Josette would find her way to me. She would laugh and tease in that way she had, and goad me into sparring with her. She would point out all of the flaws in my form, her form, and then cheat by using her seraphim wings to out-maneuver me.

It brought me energy.

On the rarest of occasions, I would find myself face to face with Ulnyx, the Great Were, my first true enemy, and in the end one of my greatest allies. We would sit in a bar together and drink, and he would regale me with stories of conquest and tell me I was weak and stupid. He would push my buttons and open my eyes.

It brought me strength.

Then I would wake up, and I would be ready.

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7

Rose was using the empty space in the apartment to do pushups when I came out of the bedroom. It wasn't the exercise that caught me off-guard, but the fact that she had stripped down to do it.

I stood in the doorway and watched her pump out fifty in rapid succession, her lean, solid muscles flexing and shifting with each rep, her naked form staying flat and perfect through the entire set. She shouted from the effort when she did the last one, pushing off with enough force to get herself up off the floor. She tucked her knees in and stood in one motion, bringing me into her field of view.

She smiled when she saw me, not the least bit embarrassed. "Hey, Landon. I hope you don't mind. I figured if we're going to be spending a lot of time together in close quarters, it would be stupid for me to be uncomfortable around you, and I didn't want to get my only pair of panties all sweaty. Besides, I'm not a shy girl by nature."

She was pretty, and I was sure the implants brought her a lot of attention from most men.

I had other things on my mind.

"Obviously." I glanced out the grimy window in the corner. The sun was up. "You don't own any other clothes?"

She laughed. "I left them at my hotel downtown. Maybe we can pick them up later? Or do you want me to stay there?"

"No. The apartment next to this one is empty. We'll get you settled over there at some point. Have you eaten?"

"I checked your fridge. You don't get a lot of visitors, do you? Ice cream and soda?"

"There's a deli downstairs. Hit the shower and get dressed, and I'll buy you breakfast."

She saluted me, teasing out a soft smile, and headed for the bathroom. She grabbed her neatly folded stack of clothes on the way.

I took a deep breath. It had been a couple of months since I had spent any amount of time around anyone, and I was getting rusty.

The water started running a minute later, followed by her mostly in-tune voice belting out some top forty hit or another. Definitely not shy. I looked up at the ceiling, extending my hand and stretching the power from it, latching it to the surface and shifting a small square of it aside.

In the past, my power had come from Purgatory, and been confined to Purgatory. When I focused my will, I was demanding change in this world, but things were really happening in that one. Those changes created a kind of ripple effect, and because Purgatory was so close, the ripples made things happen here. It was convoluted, but it had worked, though the sheer amount of power needed had kept my overall strength limited.

Now that I was working under my own power… I had only kept a small measure of it, a pin-sized sun, like an ethereal Tony Stark. I could stretch it away from me, or spread it through me, or otherwise treat it like a piece of play-doh, molding it and shaping it however I needed to do what I wanted to do. Mostly I used it to make myself stronger, or heal my wounds, that kind of thing - I was trying to fit in after all. I could also use it to push or pull, and had on a couple of occasions held the invisible energy like a makeshift lightsaber, but since it wasn't blessed or cursed, it meant having to decapitate, and that was a lot less efficient than the obsidian blade.

I shifted the energy, and my cell dropped out of the small opening and into my hand. I pushed the square back in place and

looked down at the phone. When I had held the full breadth of the power, I could have done anything. Created a new universe, challenged God Himself. What I had kept was nothing more than a crumb, a pittance, and I was grateful for that.

The phone rang twice before Obi picked it up.

"Landon, man, I thought you forgot you even had a phone."

"Why didn't you tell me you gave out the code?" I asked. Obi had been my first ally after my original return from death. He'd suffered as much as anybody who had been on my side. Maybe more. Through it, despite it, he remained my closest and most dependable friend.

There was silence on the other end.

"Obi?"

"I… oh, crap, man. I didn't think they'd really find you, and I didn't want you sitting around waiting for them." He paused again. "Yeah, I gave it to someone calling themselves 'demon huntress twenty-three'. I was a little wary about that username, but she, I'm guessing she's a she, she sounded serious."

"Yeah, she's a she. She's in my shower right now. Where are you?"

"Back in Paris, man. I had a couple weeks vacation saved up, and Sarah asked me to come visit. It beats waiting around for you to decide to call me." He laughed.

"How is she?"

"You haven't talked to her lately?"

"Not in a few months. She's eighteen, I figured if she wanted to talk to me she'd call."

"Yeah, well, to be honest, between the work she's doing to bring safe haven to the Awake and the less dangerous changelings out here, and her little romance, she hasn't had much time for me either. It's all good, though. I'm enjoying doing my part to make the world a little less crazy for the ones that know about the war and want to stay out of it. It's a nice break from being on the front lines."

The Awake were the people like Rose who knew about the Divine. She was lucky because she was strong. The ones that weren't… they usually ended up homeless, jobless, and sometimes insane. It was tough to know the truth when hardly anyone else did.

"How many does she have there now?"

"Three hundred or so. More changelings than Awake. We're still

trying to find a good solution for them though; they need fresh blood to survive. Cows and goats are doing it for now, but their genetics are screaming for human."

"Rebecca was investing in stem cell research way back when. Did you try to get a lead on the team that was doing it?"

"Solen family vampires? Maybe you could ask Hearst about it?"

"I will. He's going to owe me one. He tipped me to some strangeness with the seraphim and a scientist out in New Mexico."

Obi didn't respond right away, and I knew why. He was my ally, and my friend. He was also a good guy. He'd helped me fight demons, and he'd helped me against the Beast. He wouldn't help me with angels, and he didn't want to know about it either.

"Yeah, well, if you do find out, let me know," he said at last, his voice strained.

"I will. Anyway, I wanted to check in with you about the new recruit. Two years, Obi. I can't believe someone showed up."

"Me neither, man. Try not to get her killed on day one."

"I'll do my best. Tell Sarah I said 'hi', and that she should give me a call sometime."

He laughed again. "Okay, I will. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

I hung up and went over to the window, staring through the dirt to the growing volume of humanity below while I waited for Rose to finish her shower.

Today was going to be a good day.

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8

“So, you’re telling me that Dante Alighieri, the guy who wrote the Divine Comedy, is alive and well in Purgatory?”

We were sitting on the steps to my apartment building. Rose was downing an egg and cheese bagel while I finished the last of the quart I had carried down.

“He isn’t alive, technically. His soul is in Purgatory. He’s the boss there. He was the one who brought me back here, after I was killed. It’s a long story.”

She shook her head. “I’m still trying to wrap my pathetic human mind around-“

I put up my hand. “There’s nothing pathetic about the human mind. We have our own sets of strengths that neither Heaven or Hell can match.”

“Name one.”

“I’ll give you two. Emotional and unpredictable. The seraphim struggle because they have to follow the rules. The demons falter because they don’t have any. There’s a pattern in that kind of chaos.”

“Okay, but I would think emotions are a weakness.”

“They can be. The Beast became the Beast because of love, believe it or not. But even the strength of his destruction was born of his emotions.”

“And the demons and angels don’t have emotions?”

I laughed. “Of course they do, but their understanding of the world around them limits the vast majority of them. There are always the outliers, the minority. The angels who are temped by the promise of personal gain, or maybe a demon who falls in love.” My mind flashed back to Izak, Mephistopheles, whose love had saved Sarah from her father. “They’re good or evil. They can’t be good and evil, not like you or I can. We can see the whole picture. We can feel a full range. That doesn’t mean we’re destined to survive, but it helps balance things out a bit. Anyway, wasn’t it your love of your sister that brought you to me? Didn’t the pain of her loss make you strong?”

She looked at me, and I could see the fire there. “Good point.”

She didn’t shed any more tears, though I could see the tightness in her face. I waited it for it to soften before I spoke again.

“So, MIT… that’s a pretty serious school.”

“It can get a little heavy sometimes, sure. I’ve always been up for a challenge.”

“You said you were in engineering. What kind?”

“Biological. Genetics.”

“Am I the only one who thinks that’s ironic?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. If I had known some of the origins sooner, I might have gone into a different field. In any case, I was only into my second year. I still had a lot to learn. You don’t get cold, do you?”

I looked down at myself. I had stayed with the jeans and leather blazer, which were abnormally light for the forty-degree weather. “I could, if I wanted to.”

“That’s a nice trick.”

“I could teach you, but you’d have to die first.”

“I’ll pass. Though I do have a question. If I’m helping you fight Heaven and Hell, what’s going to happen to me when I die?”

“To be honest, I hadn’t really thought about it. When you die, your soul is weighed for all the good and evil you’ve done in your life. The scale isn’t too precise, so if you’re helping me, the odds are good that you’ll wind up in Purgatory with Dante. If that happens,

he'll take good care of you. It won't be as awesome an eternity as Heaven is supposed to be, but I'll make sure it's cushy."

I waited for her to react. To change her mind. Losing the promise of Heaven was a powerful dissuasion.

She downed the last few bites of her bagel and got to her feet. "So, are we going to find the demon, or what?"

"We are. You said you had a lead?"

"Yeah. A girl was killed in her dorm over at Columbia University. I got her name and looked her up on Facebook. Twenty-one, attractive, smart. Like my sister. From what I read, she was stabbed to death, and her boyfriend was arrested a couple hours later."

"You don't think he did it?"

"I know he didn't do it."

"How?"

She got angry at the question. "I just do. I've been tracking this asshole, I know the signs."

"I'm not saying I don't believe you. I wanted to see how much you believe in yourself."

She cooled and nodded. "I did some research. Homicide victims get dropped off at the medical examiner's office over on First and Thirtieth. I thought if you turned out to be a real thing, we could go there first, so you could see it for yourself."

"A real thing? Former people have feelings, too."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I can't even imagine what it's like for you." She paused. "So, I guess you're immortal?"

"Don't worry about it. I was trying to be funny. Sometimes I end up spending too much time alone, and I start to drift away from this." I waved my hand at the world in general. "I'm mostly immortal, as in I don't age, get sick, can take a bullet or twelve. I'm like Wolverine, or Connor MacLeod. Cut off my head, I die, except as far as I know you don't get my power. Bury me in tons of concrete, trap me ten miles underground, I don't know if I can get out of that."

"Connor MacLeod?"

"Highlander?"

"Never heard of it."

"If I were alive, I'd only be thirty-one. That isn't so much older than you that I should be getting the confused head shake at my pop culture references."

“Maybe I’m the wrong kind of geek girl? You look thirty-one to me.”

I smiled and shifted my power, using it to smooth lines, tighten skin, and bring me back to my pre-demise appearance. “How about now?”

She stared at me. “You look better with a few more years on you. More trustworthy.”

I used my power to go forward again. I had thought so, too, which is why I had aged myself in the first place.

“Better?”

“Definitely.”

“Good. Let’s go down to the morgue. I don’t know if seeing the victim will help us figure out what we’re dealing with, but it’s a start.”

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“How are we going to get in?” Rose asked.

We were standing across the street from the Chief Medical Examiner’s office. It was a plain, six-story square building located next to NYU, on the east side near the FDR Drive. We’d made the walk in good time, taking the direct path across 26th. It was early enough that it was still quiet, late enough that most of the staff had already trickled in.

“Just follow my lead,” I said. “What was the victim’s name?”

“Cheryl Paulson.”

We crossed the street, my clothes shifting and readjusting into a tweed suit with leather elbow patches and a heavy raincoat as we did. When we reached the front I held the door open for Rose and ushered her through.

An older woman was sitting behind a glass-partitioned counter, looking over some paperwork.

“Excuse me,” I said.

The woman looked up.

“Detective Mills. I’m on the Paulson case. Is she still here, or was

she transferred out?" I didn't know if that was how a real detective would have said it. It sounded legit.

"Just give me one second." She looked over at her computer and started tapping the keys. "Paulson… Paulson… brought in two nights ago. The autopsy was already done, and the paperwork was sent over to the precinct. We're just waiting on the fax so that we can send her remains back to her family in Tulsa."

I smiled. "Well, I'm glad I made it in time. I was hoping to get a look before she was gone. This is her roommate's girlfriend, Alison. She might have some important information about the case, but she needs to see the body to verify."

The woman looked at me, and then at Rose. Then she reached over and handed me a clipboard. "You'll have to sign in. Just put your name and badge number, and I'll call the assistant to escort you."

"Thank you, Miss…"

"Wells."

"Miss Wells."

I smiled at her again, and took the clipboard. I scribbled John Mills as poorly as I could on the blank sign-in page, and added Obi's former badge number at the end. I handed it back to Miss Wells and waited while she picked up the phone and dialed an internal line. She worked the computer at the same time, glancing back to the clipboard and then to the screen.

"Hi, this is Erica. Can you come up to the front and escort a Detective Mills back into the morgue to view the Paulson cadaver? Yes. Yes. Okay. Thank you, Michael." She hung up. "He'll be with you shortly."

Rose and I retreated away from the desk to wait.

"Roommate's girlfriend?" she asked. "How do you know she had a roommate?"

"I don't. I doubt they do either."

"You're lucky they didn't ask to see your badge."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small leather case with a gold badge pinned to it, also sporting Obi's number. "You mean this?" It was really a simple square of plastic, the kind used in 3d printers. Like my clothes, I could mold it and alter it to be whatever I needed. It was more than passable for a quick flip.

"You're like a regular David Copperfield."

"I have better tricks than that hack."

The door next to the glass partition opened. I was expecting a white-coat. Instead, I got a security guard. His gun was drawn, aimed squarely at my chest.

"Don't move," he said.

"What is this?" I asked.

"I don't know who you are, but impersonating an officer, especially a deceased officer, is a serious crime," Miss Wells said from behind her desk.

She had run Obi's badge while we waited. Damn.

"I can explain."

The guard kept the firearm steady. "Just stand there."

The front doors opened, and two police officers walked in.

"Turn around, spread your arms and legs," one of them said. "Both of you."

Rose glanced over at me, a hint of fear in her eyes.

I started turning, and Rose did the same. I was powered to fight demons and angels. I could kill all three of them without too much effort.

That didn't mean I was going to.

"Show me what you can do," I whispered to Rose, at the same time I leaned forward and put my hands up against the wall. I needed to see her toughness, to know she could take care of herself. The Turned, the Touched - they were humans, stronger and faster than most, but still mortal. If she couldn't handle a cop…

Her eyes registered surprise at the statement. She responded with a short nod. The officers came up behind us, cuffs in hand, and I felt a foot push against my ankle, spreading me a little wider.

"You have the right to remain silent-"

Rose's elbow snapped back, catching her target in the shoulder with enough force and surprise to knock him off-balance. Before he could recover, she turned and wrapped her arm around his neck, lifting her legs from the ground and using her weight to pull him over. My guy saw what was happening and grabbed me tight, shoving me hard into the wall and pinning my arms behind my back.

My head was turned to watch Rose, and I saw she had the officer's gun in her hand by the time they hit the ground together. She put it up against the side of his head, dropping the safety with practiced expertise. "Drop it," she ordered the guard.

He stood still, his weapon aimed at her. She was beneath the

policeman, his body blocking any kind of shot at her. My first impression of her move had been raw force, not much form. Seeing that every part of it had been intentional, that she had planned to wind up below him in possession of his sidearm - I was impressed.

I pushed the energy out, wrapping it around the guard's weapon and ripping it away, snapping it against the officer holding my arms, breaking his grip and turning. I put my hand around his neck and held him lightly.

"We just came to see the body," I said. I stared into his eyes, waiting to see any kind of spark that might signal he understood that little bit 'extra' that set the Awake apart from the Sleeping.

There was nothing.

"Get off me," Rose said. "One wrong move and I'll kill you."

I watched the officer get to his feet, Rose springing up behind him. She kept the gun trained on him, and then guided him over to the guard.

"Cuff yourselves," I said, letting my officer go. "My partner and I are going to go and identify the corpse, and then we're going to leave. You aren't going to remember any of this."

It wasn't completely true. They would remember putting the cuffs on. They just wouldn't know why. It would be awkward for them to explain later, but it was better than having to kill them. Rose had done well with the situation. I had been sloppy. The people here weren't the enemy, and I should have done better to avoid the confrontation in the first place.

Once the cuffs were on I locked the front door and went back to the desk. Miss Wells was still sitting there, frozen in fear and shock.

"Erica, if you wouldn't mind directing us back to the morgue yourself?"

She pursed her lips and stared at me. I leaned in closer, taking a deeper look into her soul.

"What have you seen?" I asked.

"I don't know what-"

"Yes, you do. Tell me what you've seen. Angels? Vampires? Things that everyone tells you aren't real, but you know they are?"

She kept staring at me.

"The girl, Cheryl Paulson. She was killed by a demon. You know they exist. You know they're real."

"I… I… no. It can't be. It's just my anxiety."

She said it. She didn't believe it.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Erica. We’re hunting it. We need to see the body, to understand.”

She pushed her chair back and walked to the door on shaky legs.

“Go down the first hallway, all the way to the back, turn left and go down the stairs. Its the second door on your right.” Her eyes stayed locked on me. “You aren’t one of them.”

“No.”

She nodded and then pointed at the policemen, sitting quietly with their wrists cuffed together. “What about them?”

“They’re going to forget. You are, too.”

“Everything?” Her eyes lit up in hopefulness.

“Not everything. I’m sorry.”

“My brother. He was… taken… when I was seven. We were playing outside. I can see them. I can feel them. I’ve been to therapy, I’ve taken pills. It isn’t enough. I thought I was crazy. I never told anyone.”

“You aren’t crazy.”

She laughed. “I think it would be better if I was.”

“I know the feeling.” I turned back to Rose. “Come on.”

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We went down to the morgue, walking with enough purpose that none of the others we crossed paths with questioned two new faces. I had never been to a morgue before, and I was surprised to find that it was one of the things television got mostly right. The room was cold and sterile, a wall of corpse storage, a desk with a computer. The chair behind it was out and turned, its occupant currently absent.

Cheryl Paulson's body was already out on a gurney, wrapped and ready for travel. I unzipped the body bag, whispering an apology as I did. I hated to have to disturb her.

What I saw was disturbing.

The body was in one piece. What was left of it, anyway. As Rose had claimed with her sister, the face was in a frozen look of ecstasy, locked with eyes rolling back, mouth open and smiling. Her neck, arms, legs, and upper body were all good, untouched. Her lower abdomen… that was a different story. It was as if a massive hand had reached in and ripped away her organs.

"I knew it," Rose said. She came up next to me and looked down

at the corpse, her face hard. “My sister’s wounds were more ragged, and less of the internals were missing, but it’s the same demon.”

I kept staring at the body, focusing on the wounds. “What kind of demon?” I asked, more to myself. I gathered my power and cast it out, letting it drift away from me, to settle on the flesh of the victim. When it had finished dropping I examined it, tracing the rise and fall of the mold it had made, running my attention along every edge, every fold, every missing piece.

“The ovaries are gone. So is the uterus. The lungs. Whatever did this…” I could feel the outline of the damage with my power. Not teeth or claws like I expected. “A blade of some kind. A razor, or a knife. I don’t think it was cursed.” It was hard to know for sure on a human. I pulled the energy back and shook my head. “The good thing about demons is they have a general profile. Vampire bites, werewolf claws, easy to identify. This - I don’t know any kind of demon that does this.”

Every part of it was getting stranger and stranger. Was Rose wrong?

“There is, Landon. I saw it. Whoever it was, they looked just like my sister. They attacked her, mutilated her, ate parts of her… and became her.” The tears threatened, but she didn’t break.

I looked down at Cheryl Paulson. Demon, human, whichever it was, she was too young to die this way. “You could have been in shock. They could have knocked you out. There are other things that explain what you thought you saw.”

Were there?

“Bullshit. If you get knocked out you don’t remember anything, and I wouldn’t have been in shock before I knew she was in trouble. There’s something out there. If you don’t know what it is, then you don’t know what it is. That doesn’t make it any less real.”

I took a deep breath. She believed, and nothing was going to alter that belief. “Okay. Let’s assume it is a demon. Let’s say it’s a new kind, or that it somehow got out of Hell. I’d venture to guess that it looks just like Miss Paulson here, and there are thirty million people in this city. How the hell are we going to find it?”

“You destroyed a god, and you can’t find a demon?”

“Like I said, demons have profiles. They prefer certain environments. I don’t know anything about this.” Dante might, and if he made an appearance I would ask him.

“What about the boyfriend? We could go and question him.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what we’d get from him that you don’t already know.”

“Probably nothing, but we can’t just leave him there. They think he killed her.”

“How are we supposed to change that? Go down there and tell them we think it was a demon?”

“I was in his shoes. You don’t know what it’s like, to have someone accuse you of doing something so horrible.”

“You’re right, I don’t. There’s nothing we can do.” I put my hand on her shoulders and looked her in the eye. “You came to me for help, and to be part of this war. You need to understand, it’s just us. Against the angels, against the demons, and unfortunately sometimes against the people we’re trying to protect. What that means is that a lot of times we have to do things that we don’t want to. Things that suck, like leaving an innocent person accused of murder. It’s part of the balance.”

She stared back at me for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and nodded. She didn’t have to like it, only accept it, and she had.

“Most of the victims were picked up at colleges. We could start there?”

I zipped the bag back up, and started for the door. “How many schools are there in the northeast?”

She sighed. “Let’s go back to my hotel so I can get my stuff. All the work I’ve been doing is on my laptop, including a map of every place the asshole has already been. Maybe we can narrow it down?”

We didn’t have much else to go on. “Where are you staying?”

“Milford Plaza.”

“The lullaby of all Broadway?”

“What?”

“Try Youtube.”

We went back out the way we came in. The policemen were gone by then, and Erica looked confused when we exited, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes. She didn’t say anything, or try to stop us.

“Walk, or cab?” I asked.

“These attacks happen every few days. We need every minute we can get if we’re going to catch up before anyone else has to die.”

“So, cab then?”

We walked to the corner, and she flagged a taxi like a true New Yorker.

“Hold on,” I said as the car stopped against the curb. “The Divine love taxis.” I opened the passenger door and peered in at the driver. “Good morning.”

He looked back at me. “Good morning, sir.” He was Sikh, with a thick beard and a turban. “Where are you headed today?”

I stared at him for a few seconds. He was clean. Mortal. I got in, with Rose trailing right behind me. “Milford Plaza.”

“Yes, sir.”

We were there ten minutes later. Rose’s room was on the third floor, a small space in a random part of the hotel. It was obvious she had dropped her suitcase on the bed and gone right to my place, because nothing else had been touched.

She unlocked and unzipped it, retrieving a laptop and flipping it open. A minute later she picked it up and turned the screen towards me.

“Here’s the map, with all the pins.”

They were spread across the New England area. Boston, Maryland, and of course New York.

“Here’s a map with pins added to all the nearby colleges.”

There were red, demon pins surrounding the city, and a single new pin at Columbia University, where Cheryl Paulson had been enrolled. A sea of green pins rested around it.

“There are a lot of potential targets left on that map. Manhattan has more than fifty schools by itself.”

“I know. Even if we split up, the odds of picking the right place still suck.”

“We need a better approach than that. Demons are chaotic, but even chaos has a pattern to it. Are the locations all you have?”

“You mean a history?” She sat on the edge of the bed, patting the spot next to her. I joined her there, and watched her flip screens. “I’ve been keeping a database of the attacks. Names, dates, locations - all correlated with any related info I could find: news articles, Facebook posts, tweets, whatever. I wrote some data analysis tools to go with it. I can step through it, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She scrolled the data, too fast for my eyes to follow.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“Not a problem. Ready?” She hit a few keys. A loading bar popped up for a second, followed by the map again. Pins started dropping, fast at first, then slowing as the dates progressed. “You

can see, there's not much of a pattern to it. At the same time, our demon doesn't typically travel too far between hits. I have a feeling they might be on foot most of the time, and maybe hitchhiking the rest. The distances seem to bear that out."

I watched the pins fall. Each one was a dead college girl whose body had been mutilated. I hadn't known anything about this. The disturbance was too small to affect the balance, and I didn't have Obi or Dante to feed me this sort of information anymore.

I didn't normally feel guilty for this kind of thing. Then again, the consequences didn't normally show up at my door.

I turned towards Rose, getting her attention. "I'm sorry for your sister. I should have seen this, known this was happening. I should have stopped it sooner."

She shook her head. "Look, I don't know that much about you, other than the fact that you claim to have already saved the world once or twice. What I do know… you gave back the god power, right? That means you can't possibly know everything. You're doing something about it now, that's what matters."

Absolution? Not complete, but her words helped. "Can you play that back again?"

"Sure."

She hit a couple of keys, and the history repeated.

I watched it three more times, a fuzzy idea in my mind clarifying with each reset.

"Can you make this thing connect the pins with a red line or something?"

"Of course." She closed out of the map, opening up the code that powered the whole thing. She went through it in a hurry, adding lines here and there.

Ten minutes later, it was done.

"The lines will be straight. I can add curves if you need it, but the algorithm is a little more complex."

"This should be more than enough."

"What are you looking for, anyway?"

"The points… It sounds crazy, but the pattern reminds me of demonic runes. Like our target is drawing them in their path."

"Are you serious?" She looked back at the screen, and her chest heaved in rhythm to a rising heartbeat.

"Let's see."

She started the animation. I watched while the pins dropped, the

lines appearing, connecting each as the murder occurred. As the series progressed, one thing was clear.

"It is a demonic rune. A few of them. Imperfect, maybe because of the straight lines, or maybe because our target likes a specific profile."

"What is it for?"

"I'm not sure. Runes are hard to translate when they're incomplete. It usually takes the entire thing to describe the meaning. It's intentional, an encryption of sorts."

She stared at it, tracing the lines with her finger. "Does it help us?"

"It might. Look at the last line. The shape." I reached forward and tapped my finger against her screen. "This should be the next point. Which school is it?"

She zoomed in until we could read the labels for the streets, and for the college.

Juilliard.

"I never liked drama students," I said.

Rose smiled as she closed the laptop and stood, slipping it back in her bag. "You're sure this is the place?"

"As sure as I can be."

She took a deep, nervous breath in. Her exhale was anxious. "Okay, we have a location. Now what do we do about the fact that we don't know what our target looks like?"

"You're Awake. You can See demons. So can I." I paused, considering. What if it didn't register as Divine? What if I was flat out wrong about it being a demon? We might only have one shot to catch it. "Just to be sure, we'll bring it to us." My eyes traveled from her brown hair, to her ample chest. "We already know you're its type."

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "You want me to be bait?"

"Isn't that what you've been waiting for? A chance to catch up to the demon that killed your sister?"

"Yeah, but we were twins. It knows what I look like. Don't you think it will remember?"

"Appearances are easy to change. A haircut, some dye, makeup and new clothes. Perfume, in case it has a strong sense of smell."

She stood and stared at me. I could read the conflict on her face. The desire for revenge, the fear of having the opportunity to get it.

“All this time… I spent over a year chasing it, and you figured it out in less than a day.”

“You figured it out. You tracked it, collected the data. Without that, we have nothing.”

“I would never have recognized a demonic rune.” She shook her head, her body trembling. “We’re talking about a demon. I knew it was real, and you’re here, and real. I’m still having trouble believing it. I’ve wanted to catch this asshole for so long. I suppose it’s as impervious to bullets as you are?”

“I’m afraid so.”

She laughed. There was no humor in it, only nerves. “I can’t fight a demon. Not on my own. Even if I had found it, even if I knew it for what it was. I would have shot it, and it would have killed me.”

“You can fight it, just not with guns. All your research on demons, and you never learned about blessed and cursed blades?”

“Not directly. There was one guy online who claimed that King Arthur used Excalibur to kill demons.”

“It was also known as the Redeemer. It did more than kill them. In any case, they’re weapons, made by angels and demons and covered in runes and scripture. Other than cutting off the head, you can’t kill a Divine without one. Don’t worry, I have a collection.” I motioned to her stuff. “Is that all you have?”

“Yeah. Kind of pathetic, right? I have to go to a laundromat twice a week.”

“Have you looked in my closet? I don’t have any clothes.”

Her head tilted, and she smiled mischievously. “You mean you’re actually naked right now?”

“Not quite.” I grabbed the edge of the jacket. “This is going to sound really geeky, but the best way I can think to describe it is that I use my god-energy to manipulate the atomic structures, and change the molecules into whatever I want or need.”

My explanation of how it worked was simple, because my own understanding was simple. I knew what was happening, though I didn’t have all the details. In my mind, I only thought about the energy, and what I wanted to do with it. The reaction was literally magic.

“That is geeky. So, you could make your leather jacket into steel or something, if you wanted to?”

I looked down at the jacket, then at her, then back at the jacket.

“I never even thought of that.”

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We spent the rest of the day taking cabs around the city, collecting the things we would need for our inception into Juilliard. We went to Macy's to find some tight faux leather leggings and a body hugging sweater, hit up the Lance Lappin Salon to have Rose's hair cut and colored, and spent an hour wandering the aisles of Whole Foods, picking up some food fit for someone who still needed to worry about calories.

It was strange to move through the day in such a 'normal' fashion, and I felt myself responding to the simplicity of it as the day wore on. It was as though everything around me took on a new dimension, a rhythm and clarity that I thought I recognized, like an old song. I knew I had been too isolated and out of touch. I hadn't realized how much.

We brought our haul back to the apartments, and I opened the unit next to mine for her to call home. It was similar to my own, and furnished with seventies throwbacks that had been left by the prior resident. I thought the decor was tacky, but Rose loved it. Seeing the reaction made me happy in a way I hadn't experienced

in years.

I almost felt human again.

“I’m having trouble getting used to this,” Rose said, running her hands through her hair. The brown was now a multi-toned blonde with hints of strawberry, cut into fashionable pieces that fell lightly over her scalp.

It was morning. I was sitting on the couch in Rose’s apartment, waiting for her to finish getting ready. Based on the timing of the prior attacks, we were expecting that the demon would be looking for his next victim today, and we had done our best to ensure that she would be the one it chose.

“It looks great,” I replied. “It really suits your face.”

She turned away from the mirror and smiled. “Thanks. What do you think of the outfit?” She spun around, showing off the clothes.

She really was an appealing woman. “I just hope you don’t attract *too much* attention.” I reached behind my back. “I have something for you.”

“You bought me a present?”

“Sort of. I didn’t buy it.” I brought my hand out, holding up the blessed knife I’d recovered from my storage unit in the basement. It was long enough to kill a demon with, small enough to stick into the heel of the ankle boots she was wearing.

“How romantic.” She laughed and took the knife, examining the scripture etched into the metal. “It’s beautiful.” She ran her finger along the edge, pulling back as it sliced easily through her flesh and drew blood. “Sharp, too.” She sucked the blood from her finger. “What would happen if I stabbed you with it?”

“It would hurt. Give it a try though, you gave me an idea yesterday and I wanted to test it out.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “You can’t do any permanent damage.”

She took the knife and flipped it in her hand, putting the blade up against her wrist. She rushed forward and slashed across my chest.

I pushed the energy out along my shirt, changing it to something denser and more resilient, something more like spider-silk than steel. The knife started skidding off, and then sank through, cutting into my side.

“Oh, shit. Landon, I’m sorry.”

I looked down at the wound, pushing the energy to it. It was

harder to recover from Divine weapons than it was to bullets, which is why I had wanted to put the shield idea to the test.

"It's okay," I said. "I didn't make it strong enough." Both the wound and the clothes mended while she watched. "I didn't want to do something heavy, because it will pull the rest of the cloth down and move it off the impact point. I can't do the whole thing, or I won't be able to move."

"Maybe it wasn't the best idea."

"It has potential. I'll have to think about it some more."

She knelt down and tucked the blade into her boot. "Thanks again for the knife."

We left the apartments, deciding to walk the sixteen or so blocks north to Lincoln Center. The sun was out, and the weather temperate for the time of year. If it hadn't been for the map, the pins, the runes, and the demon, I would have enjoyed the chance to get to know Rose a little better.

Instead, I was more nervous than I had been since my rebirth. I didn't like not knowing what we were walking into, or who or what we would find. It had been a long time since I had felt so clueless, so unprepared and vulnerable.

"There's the school," Rose said.

We had reached the intersection at Broadway and 65th, leaving the sharp corner of the school pointing at us like the tip of a dagger, though it bore a closer resemblance to the bow of a ship, or the mouth of a whale. I watched the people near the building with a close eye, searching for that internal sense that they were not what they seemed, and at the same time wondering which of the girls I saw entering the school today might not be coming back tomorrow if we failed in our plan.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," I said. "Which isn't much of a surprise."

"No. Let's find out where the library is."

We crossed the street and made our way towards the entrance to the school: a row of glass doors leading to a reception area and a set of stairs. I repeated my aging trick as we did, reversing myself back to my pre-death appearance.

"I still like you better older," Rose said.

"This is a little less suspicious. Are you ready for this?"

"I'm nervous, scared, angry. Yeah, I'm ready."

We didn't stop at the help desk, instead heading straight up the

stairs together, laughing and making small-talk and doing our best to look like we belonged. There were a few other students around us, and I eyed each one carefully, making sure they were pure mortal. I knew Rose was doing the same.

It took a bit of wandering, a few missteps, and a couple of reversals, but we managed to locate the library without attracting the wrong kind of attention, and without spotting any demons.

We split up as soon as we got inside.

Most libraries had a similar setup, and despite housing one of the most complete collections of music related resources in the world, Juilliard's wasn't much different. An open space on the ground floor with tables for studying, bookshelves ringing the walls and aligned in columns, and two more floors of material rising above it. Rose kept to the ground floor, heading straight to a table to put her props down and act studious, while I hit the stairs and climbed to a vantage point that allowed me to scan anyone who entered.

After that, there was nothing to do but hope we'd picked the right place, and wait.

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We were there for four hours.

Then five.

Then six.

Rose spent the entire time at her table, laptop open, a stack of books aligned around her. I spent as much time as I could near the steps where I could see the door, moving just enough to not look like a stalker. I wandered back and forth with a book in my hands, open to a random page, my eyes peering over the edge to the position below.

Seven o'clock came. The library was closing in a couple of hours, there were only a half-dozen people left milling around, and we still had nothing.

I had been wrong. That was the only way to explain it. Maybe the rune was a coincidence, or maybe I had picked the wrong school. In a city as dense as New York, the minor differences between the straight lines versus the actual sweeping curves of the shape could have brought us to the wrong place.

Didn't Fordham have a campus nearby?

Or maybe the demon had already come and gone, picking its victim and setting a date. Maybe it had gone against its penchant for libraries, choosing the stage or the orchestra.

I headed for the stairs, ready to collect Rose and try to figure out what to do next. If the demon kept up his killing pace, someone was going to die tonight, and it was my fault. Not that people didn't die every day. Not that demons didn't kill a fair number of them. It didn't usually bother me, except… Rose had come to me for help, and when she did, she came to me on behalf of every girl that either had been killed, or might be killed. She had jumped through my hoops, she had cut through my red tape. She had worked out the tough ciphers that Obi created, and believed strongly enough to come to my apartment to see if I was for real. No one had ever done that before, and the idea of that made it all the more meaningful.

It also made it personal.

I was halfway down when I noticed someone had approached her; a tall, skinny guy with shoulder length black hair in tight jeans and a leather jacket. Where the hell had he come from?

I went back up the stairs, going straight along the railing, trying to get to a spot where I could see his face, his eyes. Rose was talking to him, and she looked calm and comfortable, not what I would expect if she were face to face with her sister's killer.

I circled around behind her, finally getting a look at him. He had a narrow face, angled features, and dark eyes. I stared at him, expecting the alarms to go off.

Nothing.

He reached into his pocket and handed Rose a business card. He brushed a piece of his hair away from his face. He glanced up, his eyes passing over me for just an instant.

Then he left.

The place was almost empty, so I vaulted the railing, letting myself drop to the floor, pushing off with my power at the last second in order to land easy. I came up behind Rose.

"What do you think?" she asked me, holding the card up behind her head. It was glossy and colorful. I took it from her and scanned it. "He's a musician. His name is Peter."

The card was an advertisement for a club his band would be playing at in two hours. "Entropy?"

"Short and sweet, I like it. He gave a card to everyone in here."

"I didn't see him come in."

“He was here for a few hours, studying at the table over there.” It was below the overhang. “You must have been sleeping or something when he came in. Anyway, he didn’t register on my demon warning system, and if he already has a band and a gig, I doubt he’s new to the school. I don’t think he’s our asshole.”

She was right. There was nothing suspicious about him.

“Do you like rock music?” I asked.

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Entropy was playing at a club a few blocks away, a place called the Underground, probably because the entire thing was located in the sub-basement of a residential apartment building, a place that supposedly had once been anything from an upscale brothel, to an opium den, to a Mafia hangout.

Now it was a stage, a pit, and a bar. There were lots of multi-colored spotlights, lots of grafitti-coated bare cement and pipes, and lots of people.

They were dressed in an assortment of short skirts, blue jeans, and leather, and crowded into the place at least a few hundred strong, leaving little enough room to maneuver through the flesh, and little enough fresh air to breathe. They were mostly college age, though I could spot a few that were a bit too old to be there, and even more that were definitely too young. There had been a bouncer at the door up the steps, but apparently he wasn't very picky about checking ID, or actually preventing anyone from entering.

"Anita would have loved this place," Rose said. We were near

the center of the space, halfway between the bar at the rear and the stage at the front. A DJ was spinning tracks from a cage hanging over our heads, and bodies pounded and shifted around us.

"What about you?"

"Back then, yeah. Life has made enjoying stuff like this a challenge."

"I'd love to say it gets easier-"

"But you don't want to lie to me. I know. I get it."

A girl came out at me from the left. She had tripped or something, and was on her way to taking a painful fall. I lunged forward and caught her, one hand resting on her shoulder, the other on her ass.

"Are you okay?"

She looked at me. A vampire.

"Landon, what the-" Rose had noticed. She could See the girl I'd caught well enough to know she wasn't human.

"Landon?" The vamp was scared. She squirmed in my arms, trying to get free. "Let me go. Please."

"I'm not here for you," I said. I lifted her upright. A young guy came out of the crowd and took her arm.

"What the hell are you doing, touching my girl?"

"David-" She tried to intervene. I'd inadvertently walked right into her mark.

"Just trying to keep her from smashing her head on the floor," I said. "No harm done." I put up my hands.

"Yeah, right. No harm done? Your hand on her ass is no harm done?"

"David-" she said again, still trying.

David's hands curled into fists.

I took one quick step towards him, hitting him hard below the temple. He had no time to react. He dropped to the floor, the rest of the crowd making room for him.

"Sorry, you'll have to settle for frozen," I said to the vampire.

She looked down at David, and then back at me. Then she took off.

"Of all the stupid luck," I said, turning to Rose.

"She was a vampire," she said.

"Yes."

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "I've never been that close before. What was she doing with him?"

“Vampires can’t survive without human blood. Since she came to party with him, I’m guessing she was planning to keep him around as a source. She’d take him home, have sex with him, have a little drink, rinse, and repeat until his body couldn’t take it anymore. Otherwise, she might have brought him somewhere and drained him out, drinking enough to be satisfied, and collecting the rest to either save for later, or put onto the exchange.”

“The exchange?”

“Vampires have a global marketplace where they buy and sell blood, valued by the source.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. I shut it down temporarily a few years ago. It started up again while I was gone, and it hasn’t been worth the effort to go after it again.”

“They kill people for their blood, and that’s not worth the effort?”

“You know the war on drugs?”

“Yeah.”

“How well has that gone?”

She stared at me for a few seconds, and then accepted it.

We turned towards the stage, even as five guys appeared on it, walking out from the left. A drummer, a bassist, a guitarist, a girl in a tight cocktail dress, and Peter.

The DJ faded out the music, and the rest of the eyes turned to the stage.

“Hey bitches!” The girl shouted into the mic. “DJ Spinz is hot, but I know you all came to hear some real, live, kick-ass rock music!”

The crowd erupted in cheers and whistles.

“Hell yeah!” she agreed. “We’ve got some killer music for you tonight. Here’s Entropy!”

More cheers, clapping, whistles as the girl retreated from the stage and Peter took up the mic. The band started playing behind him, and they blasted into the first song of their set.

“We need to get up front,” I said. “You try to get his attention, while I get behind the stage.”

“Okay.”

We moved forward, making slow progress through the pits that had formed all around the floor, trying to keep outside of them and avoid the distraction. The music blasted around us, and to be

honest, it wasn't bad. Peter had a great singing voice, and his riffs were tight.

How could this guy be our killer? It seemed ridiculous, impossible, and it probably was.

I'd gotten screwed by impossible too many times to risk it.

We had nothing else. If we were wrong, we would have been wrong even if we hadn't followed him. If we were right? There was only upside.

It took me four songs to get to the stage. There was a bouncer there, keeping a bunch of screaming females from passing through. It only took a thought for my clothes to morph into a replica of his 'security' t-shirt and jeans, a badge around my neck.

"Hey," I said to him. "They asked me to head into the back."

He was a lot bigger than me, and he tipped his head down and nodded, stepping aside with the end of the rope barrier. I slipped in behind him, thankful to have some room to move again.

I climbed up to the corner of the stage and put my eyes on each of the band members, just in case. They didn't register as anything other than mortal, and so I turned my attention to the crowd, searching for Rose. I found her getting closer to the front, her hands over her head, waving towards Peter.

Perfect. I left the stage, following it around to the dressing rooms in the corner. I knocked on the door before pushing it open and going in. Instrument cases were laying open on the floor, half-empty water bottles resting on simple tables on either side of an old couch. I took a look around, hoping to sense something Divine.

There was nothing.

I retreated from the room, and went to the next one. It was little more than a closet, with a chair and a mirror amidst the cleaning supplies and toilet paper. There was a tiny bathroom in the back corner behind a narrow door, a toilet and sink that looked like it had never been cleaned.

Again, nothing.

Entropy played their set straight through, two hours without a break. By the end, they were coated in sweat, and Peter had removed his shirt to reveal a slim, toned torso. I was standing at the corner of the stage when a sweater landed on it and he picked it up to wipe his forehead.

It was Rose's.

I found her behind the bouncer, her frilly silk bra drawing his

eyes. She was giving all of her attention to Peter, hooting and cheering and jumping up and down, making sure her breasts made themselves known. It must have been working, because as soon as Entropy was off the stage, Peter went over to the bouncer and had him let her through. She took his hand, and I retreated to the closet ahead of them.

She was going all-in on figuring out who or what he was. Would she regret it when she discovered he wasn't the demon we were looking for?

Something told me she wouldn't.

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“Did you like it?” Peter asked.

I peered out from a crack in the bathroom door, watching him. He held the door for Rose, who kept her eyes locked on him while she walked in.

“You’re amazing,” she said.

“I think this is yours?” He laughed and held up her sweater. It was damp with his sweat.

“This can be yours, too,” she replied.

He closed the door, and she pushed herself into him, bringing her lips to his. He was warm to the affection, and he returned it with enthusiasm.

“You’re wild,” he said, between kisses.

“I know.” She turned him around and pushed him down into the chair. Then she straddled his lap. “Do you like it?”

I wasn’t sure if I should keep watching or not. I wasn’t interested in being witness to what was about to happen.

“I love it.”

More kissing. I backed away from the door when Rose took off

her bra. How had I ended up in this situation?

"I can be wild, too," Peter said. "More wild than you've ever had, I bet. You want to see?"

She moaned her consent.

I sat down on the can and closed my eyes. I would have closed my ears if I could.

I heard his lips on her skin. Her soft purring of enjoyment.

Stuck on a toilet. If Obi could see me now.

I didn't catch it right away, and I don't think I would have if I hadn't been sitting there. It was a smell. A light, sweet, strange smell, that traveled from the closet to the closest air duct, which happened to be in the tiny bathroom. It was a smell I sort of recognized, the slightly sulfurous edge making a connection in my mind.

I opened my eyes, jumped to my feet, pulled the black stone from my pocket, threw open the door, and stepped out into the room.

Rose's head was back, her mouth open in ecstasy, her neck long and exposed. Peter removed his lips from it and turned towards me. I could See him now, his hot aura unmistakable.

How the hell had he been hiding it?

He stared at me, standing up with Rose wrapped around him. She was still moaning, still moving in his arms even though he'd stopped. He turned and put her on the chair, extracting himself from her.

I summoned the spatha, pulling it into this world. The black blade appeared in my hand, pointed squarely at the demon. "You've been a bad boy," I said. I noticed his lips were moist, too moist. A dark mucus was resting on the edges. Poison.

It had left Rose in some kind of strange high. She squirmed in the chair, oblivious to me.

"What do you know about it?"

"I know what you are, and I know what you've been doing."

He looked at the blade. He looked at my face. Then he ran, taking three quick steps and getting out the door before I had a chance to move.

"Shit." I took two steps and paused at Rose's side. I remembered the wounds on Cheryl Paulson's body. The poison was to incapacitate, not to kill. "I'll be right back."

I gave chase.

The spatha vanished and I pocketed the stone, even as I flew out the door and turned my head just in time to see him round the corner. I raced along the hallway, past the main dressing room, towards an illuminated ‘exit’ sign mounted on the wall. Ahead of me, I heard an old door squeal open.

I pushed the energy into my muscles, increasing their strength and upping my speed. I went horizontal to bounce off the wall with my legs, pushing off and rolling to my feet, launching towards a metal door ahead. I reached out and yanked it open before I got there, hitting the steps without slowing, taking them up three at a time.

They fed to a second door, and that door led out into the alley behind the apartments. I came out and skidded to a stop, my head going left and right, then up in search of the demon. I had gone as fast as I was able.

Somehow, he had gone faster.

The alley was deserted. Bags of garbage rested against the wall next to an overflowing dumpster. A trickle of water dribbled from a pipe near my feet. I could just barely hear the thumping of the club through the cement.

A cough near the mouth of the alley drew my attention. I walked towards it, keeping the stone in my hand, ready to summon the sword. As I approached, I saw a homeless man on the ground, his back against the wall. He was almost invisible under all of the threadbare clothes he was wearing.

I stepped right up to him. His head shifted, and he stared up at me. He was old, his skin wrinkled and veined, his fingers narrow and bony.

“Spare some change?” he asked with a nearly toothless smile.

I summoned the spatha, and shoved it up against his throat.

“Huh? What are you doing?” He tried to push himself further back against the wall. I caught the smell of his urine rising below us. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

“Did you see a man with long hair come down here?” I asked. I knew the demon could change shape, but the vagrant was clearly terrified.

“I… He went that way,” he raised his hand and pointed down the street. “Please don’t hurt me. I didn’t do-“

I didn’t hear the rest of what he said, because something hit me.

I didn’t see it, didn’t hear it, didn’t sense it. I felt a heavy blow

to my ribs, and then I was airborne, twisting and coming to ground back down the alley, sliding through the grime. I tried to breathe in, finding it labored. My ribs were broken by the strike, my arm by the fall. I pushed the energy into the wounds, pulling myself back together at the same time I got to my feet and looked down the alley.

There was nothing there.

"What the hell?"

I felt the rush of air from an incoming mass, and then was back in the air, my body slamming into the wall of the apartments hard enough to crack the cement. I threw some of the energy into healing my spine, the rest into throwing myself away from the impact point. I landed in a roll, facing back towards it.

The attack had taken my first breath.

What I saw stole the second.

He looked like a medieval knight, six feet tall, in matte steel armor with a simple helm covering his head. He was covered in scripture, angelic scripture, dense and tight, etched into the armor and glowing a soft blue in the darkness of the alley. His fist was planted in the wall where my head should have been; a wide, flat blade slung below it, stabbed directly into what would have been my neck.

An angel? It couldn't be. Angels weren't allowed to strike first. It was against the rules. It made them fall.

The knight's head turned. His face was visored, the eyes hidden by black shadows. He started towards me, feet almost silent against the ground. A second blade extended from beneath his other arm.

I got to my feet. The first hit had forced the spatha from my grip, and I backed away, trying to get a second to find it on the ground.

The knight was fast, ridiculously fast in that heavy armor. He took a dozen steps towards me and then leaped, jumping high in the air in an arc that would bring him down on me. When he reached the top of his leap, his arm pointed out and his wrist turned over, revealing a set of six small bolts mounted to the forearm. A small spark, and one of them shot towards me.

I swung the power out like a cape, using it to knock the missile aside, and letting the momentum push me. I slid back a few feet, the knight hitting the ground right in front of me.

"Who are you?" I asked, still trying to see through the visor.

It answered with its blades, coming at me again in a flurry of attacks. I sidestepped the first blade, and managed to back just far enough away to avoid the second. It launched another bolt as its arm swept past. The missile dug deep into my flesh, puncturing a lung and leaving me breathless again. I stumbled away, my new fall to the pavement helping me avoid getting stabbed.

It wouldn't miss me again.

I gathered the energy around me and pushed it out, driving it all into the knight. It slammed against it like a tidal wave, throwing my opponent away, sending it into the wall across from us. I fought to breathe, pulling the energy back and redirecting it into healing.

The knight started coming again, unaffected.

"Wait," I said. "Damn it, wait."

He didn't listen. He didn't slow. I threw the power against him again, and again he was thrown. It was a delaying tactic, and I couldn't do it indefinitely.

I finished healing, the bolt falling out of my stomach and clattering on the pavement. I reached out with my power, lifting it and firing it at the knight like a bullet. It rocketed into the chest plate, the force sending it through. A blessed weapon couldn't kill an angel, but it would still hurt going in.

I waited for a scream that never came. He still didn't slow, raising his arm to make the killing blow as he arrived.

"Landon."

The homeless man was on his feet, the spatha in his hand, hilt out. There was no time to wonder who the man was, or how he knew my name. I latched onto the sword with my power, pulling it to me. I was just fast enough to catch the knight's blade on it, and I poured energy into my muscles to keep steady against the force of the blow. The angel had lost the element of surprise, and now it was a fair fight.

I turned the blade and used the momentum to spin to his side, swinging the side with the demonic runes on the edge, hitting it up against the armor. The scripture there flared brighter, pushing me back. I spun the other way, caught the incoming blade, and threw out the energy to shove the other one aside. I kicked out with enhanced strength, knocking the knight back. It fired a third bolt at the same time it tumbled to the ground, the missile catching me in the shoulder.

I cursed in pain and switched sword hands, not taking the time

to heal just yet. The arm was coming up to fire again, and I shoved it aside and then came down hard on the elbow, the spatha leading with the scripture edge. The blade sunk into the metal, and then straight through, severing the hand.

Again, I expected a scream of pain.

Again, he didn't make a sound.

The second blade came around and caught me in the thigh, slashing across and creating a deep wound. I did cry out, even as the bolt it fired from the same hand caught me below the arm. The damage made me drop the blade again, and I fell away, bringing the power back to heal.

The knight started getting up.

The vagrant appeared in front of me. He lifted the hilt of the spatha with his foot, bringing it up into his hand in a smooth motion. He hopped onto the knight's chest, kicked the arm away and drove the blade down into the angel's head.

It fell back, but it wasn't over. The homeless man repositioned himself at the knight's side and pulled the blade from his head, raising it and bringing it down in a strong chop.

The helm rolled away.

That should have been the end of it. Instead, the body started moving again. My savior hit it with the sword, leaving deep marks in the metal, even as it regained its feet, ignoring the attacks. As it did, I could see that there was no blood, and in fact no flesh at all.

Hearst's message resonated.

The angels were consorting with a leading robotic engineer.

The body raised its arms to the sky, holding them together like it was praying. I heard the whisper, and I tracked the trio of angels that swooped in. Two took it by the arms and lifted it away like a broken toy, while the third landed between it and us, sword out, ready to defend. He didn't speak. He didn't even look at us directly.

Then they were gone.

I pushed myself to a sitting position, feeling the burn of the energy healing my body. The vagrant approached me, the obsidian sword in his hand. My mind was racing to catch up, to make sense of the entire sequence of events.

"Who are you?" I asked.

One moment, I was looking at a homeless man.

The next, long-haired Peter.

The next, Cheryl Paulson.

Finally, I was gazing up at a man I recognized.
A man I hated.

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“It can’t be,” I said. He was still holding the blade. I waited for him to plant it in me.

His smirk twisted every part of my soul.

“Surprise.”

Gervais. The archfiend responsible for more of my pain and loss than any other demon. He had imprisoned and raped his own sister, the angel Josette, to produce Sarah, to create a creature outlawed by both Heaven and Hell, a true diuscrucis, a true balance of demon, angel, and human. A creature that could wield untold power. Enough power to rule the world.

Or destroy it.

Gervais, who had sided with the Beast, taking the smallest thread of his power and becoming an undead… thing. A thing with no soul, evil or otherwise. A thing that had plotted to capture the rest of the Beast’s power. A thing that had been destroyed when the Beast’s power had become mine.

Or so I had thought.

I bounced to my feet, tensing to attack, ready to rip the smirking

demon apart.

"Landon, wait." He flipped the sword in his hand, and held it out to me, hilt first. "I don't want to fight you."

I laughed, filled with anger and hate. "Are you kidding me? I don't give a shit what you want."

He pushed a lock of curly black hair away from his angled face. "You should, diuscrucis." He kicked the helm of the knight towards me. "This is bad for both of us."

I glared at him, seething, the head laying at my feet. I could see the wires and actuators in my peripheral vision, along with the etched scripture along the surface of the metal.

"I know. I know. You are angry with me. I don't blame you. I hurt Sarah. I tried to destroy the world, and yes, given this new chance I would like to do so again. I know about the balance, Landon. That thing at your feet, that is a threat to the balance, not me. Look at me. I'm a pathetic little piss-ant now compared to that. Compared to you."

My hands clenched, my heart pounded, my breath was shallow.

"I saved your life. I helped you fight it. You didn't know the hobo was me. I could have escaped."

I took one more deep breath, pictured pummeling him in my mind, and then let it go. Damn him, because he was right.

"That is better, no?"

I took the spatha from him and sent it away. "How are you even here? Sarah killed you."

He shrugged. "Not quite. When I sided with the Beast, he destroyed my body, and he ravaged my soul. He wrapped it up in his power, both to make me stronger, and to compel me to do his bidding. I was a slave, you see. Something he didn't mention when he offered me the opportunity to be second to a god.

"Then you put him away, and I was free. I knew I could capture his power, and have it all for mine. I would have succeeded, but I underestimated my sweet daughter. Oh, you should have been there, Landon. To see her make the change. To see the power of her. Power that should have been mine. Power we were supposed to share. You and Josette. You made her… good."

He spat the word like it was poison.

"When you destroyed the Beast and took his power, you didn't destroy my soul," he said. "It went back to Hell. Back to Lucifer. He tortured me for being a traitor. An eternity of torture in an instant

of time here. When he had enough, he decided to send me back again, as a new kind of creature that he has been developing."

I liked the part about the torture. The part about a new kind of demon? Not so much. "A creature that can hide their demonic aura, and change shape?" Talk about evolution.

"Yes, that and more. I don't just change shape. I become the person. All of their memories, all of their knowledge. Everything. I can become any of them, so no one would ever know the difference."

His body changed. Back to Peter, to Cheryl, to the vagrant, cycling through dozens of forms.

"Enough," I shouted. It was Rose standing in front of me. No, not Rose. Anita.

He went back to being himself. "Except the design is imperfect. He said as much. I am the beta test. The first field trial. It isn't enough to drink the blood of mortals. To stay hidden, to be able to change, I need the true flesh of life." He shook his head sadly. "I have done horrible things and enjoyed them. Even I find that part distasteful."

"Lucifer has millions of souls he could have used for his experiment. Why you?"

"You think this is a boon?" He laughed. "It is part of my torture. Send me back to the world where I was once top of the food chain, as a creature so flawed that there would be no chance that I wouldn't draw your attention, or the attention of the seraphim. A creature so weak that I cannot win in a fight. That's right, diuscrucis. I ran from you, because I cannot defeat you." He pointed at the head. "I helped you, because I know there are no demons that can defeat them. How can I rise up again, if the balance is broken before I am dominant once more?"

This whole thing was getting shittier by the minute. He expected me to, what? Let him help me? "If you can't defeat me, then give me one good reason why I shouldn't just kill you right now. You've made it clear you intend to work your way back to where you were. I'm sure the runes you were drawing with the bodies has something to do with that."

He held out his hands. "I am what I am, diuscrucis. Neither you or I can change that. So, why try to be dishonest with you about my motivations? Yes, my path of feeding does have an ulterior motive, one that I was hoping to complete before I was discovered. One

good reason that you shouldn't kill me? Because I am not the only demon who knows of it. I am not the only demon who might like to copy it. You need me, to keep it from happening."

"Keep what from happening?"

"It is a ritual. A summoning ritual."

"What does it summon?"

"Of course, I'm not going to tell you. Not today. I need… assurances."

"You're bargaining with me? I could kill you right now."

"Which is why I wish to bargain. I have something you want-"

"You claim to have something I want. You could be full of shit."

He laughed. "I am not, as you say, full of shit. Not with this. Why would I waste two years for something that had no value? For you? Please. I care only enough about you to hope to kill you myself."

Whatever it was, he wouldn't be summoning it unless he was going to have control over it. He wouldn't be summoning it unless it was enough to bring him back to power. If he was as weak as he claimed to be, which wasn't definite but seemed likely, it wasn't something I could just dismiss.

"So, I have something you want," he repeated. "And you have something we all want. Wherever that creature came from, it is obvious to me that you are the only one that can stop it."

"You destroyed it, not me. And, it almost killed me."

"Yes, it would have, if not for me." He gave me a smug smile. "In your defense, you were caught off-guard. You still weakened it. Otherwise, I would never have been able to get close. Even the largest fire demon will fall to one of those bolts. How they have gotten the full blessing on them is a terrifying wonder. No, there is no demon here that can stand up to something like this. Which if I am not wrong, and I rarely am, is the point."

"They were beta testing it, weren't they?" I said. "To see how it would do against me."

He nodded. "It seems likely."

"How did they know where to find me? I'm as hidden as you are without line of sight."

"Perhaps they have been following me? Or perhaps they knew where to follow you?"

Rose.

Could it be? Was she working with them?

“What do you say, diuscrucis? I will help you against the angels, and once they are stopped I will cease my activity in the summoning, tell you its purpose, and give you the names of the other demons here who know how to perform it. In exchange, you will allow me to live, you will not stop me from feeding as I must, and you will help me fight the angels until this business is done.”

Gervais was smart. He was cunning. He couldn’t be trusted. No demon could be trusted. I had a choice. I could still kill him now, and take my chances with the summoning. His new power did have its value though, and I had a feeling I could put it to good use. Keeping the balance meant putting personal shit aside. It meant shifting tides and strange alliances. The… thing whose head was at my feet almost killed me, and it was a prototype. It was the greatest threat I had seen since the Beast. Gervais was right about being a piss-ant. At least right now.

“I want a solid binding. The kind that will cripple you if you try to go against the bargain.” Demons made deals by shaking bloody hands. It created an internal contract that could be broken more or less easily depending on the strength of the deal, and the strength of the other party. That strength was determined by volume. “Oh, and I want you to stay the hell away from Sarah. If I even think you’re trying to get near her-”

“Yes, yes. Fine. I will leave her be. I’m not eager to find myself impaled on her wingtips again.” He produced a small, cursed knife from somewhere on him, the same one that had cut open his victims. “Take what you want. I’ll find another way eventually. I always do.” He ran the blade along his wrist, so that it ran down into his palm.

“Both hands,” I said.

He did the other without comment. I stepped forward, took the knife, and made the slightest cut in my own flesh. Just enough blood on my side to seal the deal. Then I clasped his hands.

We exchanged the terms of the deal. As we did, I could feel the weight of the binding growing on my soul. I could tell from the way Gervais’ face paled that he felt his end much more heavily.

Would he regret the decision?

Or would I?

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“Whatever you did, you need to undo it,” I said.

Gervais and I were back in the Underground, standing in front of Rose. She was still contorted, her mouth open, eyes rolled back in her head.

“I cannot undo it. It is a toxin that overstimulates the pleasure center of the brain. It will wear off in an hour or two. Do not worry for her, diuscrucis. She cannot help but enjoy it.”

“What about the way she threw herself at you? Was that her, or you?”

He smiled. “Pheromones. I passed them to her in the library. Normally, I make a date, I get them to bring me home, then I disable them with the toxin and do what I must. This was more convenient today, and the positioning was better than the dormitory.”

“Convenient?”

“Yes. A question for you: how did you know I would choose her?”

“You’ve been predictable. Besides, you already took her twin

sister. We had a feeling you'd go for someone similar."

He started laughing. "I killed her sister, and now you are going to what? Introduce us?" His cackling grated on me.

"Shut up." The craziness of it hadn't eluded me, I just didn't have much of a choice. If she was going to be with me she had to learn the rules, as lousy as they could be sometimes. If she couldn't… at least I'd know that now, before I invested more time with her.

Then there was the fact that she might be a plant.

Of course he didn't shut up. He kept laughing until the humor of it ran out. "What of this?" he asked, holding out the knight's head.

"I have a lead on that. A message from Valerix to come see her."

His eyes lit up. "Valerix? Really? You haven't done that saucy minx in yet? Now that will be an adventure."

"Can you go do something useful, like call a cab? We need to get her out of here."

"Of course, of course. Your wish is my command." He put the head on the floor and morphed into Peter. "I'll tell the guys I wore her out." He laughed again, and vanished from the room.

As soon as he was gone, I took a deep breath and tried to release some of the tension from my body. Dealing with the Beast was easier than this.

I found Rose's sweater on the floor. It was still disgusting with Gervais' sweat, so I slipped it over my arm and pushed the energy into it, watching it break apart and reorganize in the blink of an eye. Then I gently tilted Rose's head so I could slip it back on her and cover her naked upper torso. She didn't react at all to my manipulation. It didn't seem she could react to anything. I could only imagine what it would be like to be trapped in a paralyzing orgasm. At what point did the inescapable aspect of the pleasure turn it into hellish pain?

Gervais returned a minute later, still looking like Peter, the drummer trailing behind.

"Oh shit, man," he said, seeing Rose sitting there. "What the heck did you do to her?" He looked up at me. "And who are you?"

"I'm her brother," I said.

He wasn't sure how to react, so he laughed. "Dude, are you serious? This is so screwed up."

"Just help us get her to the cab," Gervais said. "She's tripping pretty hard."

“Yeah, yeah, no problem, Pete. I’ll take her legs. Man, she has a nice-”

“Do you mind?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, man.” He took her legs, while Gervais took her arms. I picked up the head and guided them through the hallway, opening the doors ahead of them.

“That’s a sweet rig,” the drummer said as we walked, pointing at the head. “Must crank some massive sound.”

I didn’t know what he thought it was. “You bet your ass.”

We waited a couple of minutes for the cab, keeping Rose propped up so she only looked drunk.

“I’m gonna make sure she gets home okay,” Gervais said to the drummer after she was loaded in. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow for class.”

“Okay, Pete. Peace.” He backed away from the car.

“Hey, is she okay?” the driver asked.

“She’s fine. She just needs to get home to sleep it off,” I said.

He looked concerned, but didn’t argue. I gave him the address, and we were back at the apartment inside of ten minutes. Rose had loosened up a little by then, her head slumping forward and her limbs twitching.

“Now I know where you live,” Gervais said, helping me get her out of the car. “Not even bourgeoisie. More like a sewer rat.”

I looked back at him, holding my tongue against the surfacing anger.

I was going to have to move again when this was over.

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17

For the second time in as many days, there was someone waiting in my apartment.

He was sitting on my sofa, his feet up, his cane laid across his lap, the big ruby at the end sparkling despite an absence of direct light. He was wearing a suit, white with large blue pinstripes, and a matching bow tie. His hair was slicked back, his beard neatly trimmed.

“Signore!” Dante said, as I angled in through the door, holding Rose’s top half.

Her silence had turned to mumbles, and her eyes had closed.

“Get out of the way,” I replied, leaving the Lord of Purgatory to scramble. He planted his cane on the floor and vaulted over it, his athleticism betraying his aged appearance.

“Is that any way to greet me, when-“

He fell silent, his mouth hanging open.

Gervais had turned the corner.

“Ah, the poet,” he said, on seeing Dante. “Still carousing with the rabble?”

We laid Rose down on the couch.

"I'll go and get the other package." Gervais glanced at Dante. "Maybe you'll be gone by the time I get back?" He walked out, closing the door behind him.

"Signore, a word."

I leaned down over Rose's face, brushing the hair away from it. "Rose?"

She mumbled and settled back.

"Signore." He tapped me on the shoulder with his cane.

I turned and got back to my feet. "Dante. You picked a strange time to make an appearance."

"My apologies. As you know, it has become increasingly difficult for me to track the movements of Heaven and Hell since I lost Mr. Ross. Alichino is proving to be less than an ideal replacement. Anyway, that is of little matter. How and what is that demon doing here?"

"You didn't always have your Collector. How did you manage then?"

"Things were simpler when everything had to be spoken in person, or sent by messenger. Technology… she has made my work all the more complex. You didn't answer my question. The archfiend… I believed him destroyed."

Rose groaned again. "Landon?"

I knelt down. "I'm here."

"Signore!" Dante cracked the cane across my back. "I asked you a question."

I closed my eyes, pushed out the pain, took a deep breath, and turned around again. "Mind your temper, Dante. I'm not in the mood."

He smiled weakly. "Yes. Again, my apologies. I am a bit… distraught, over your choice of accomplice."

"Landon." Her voice was groggy and dry.

Her hand reached up and grabbed mine.

"It's okay, Rose. We're back at the apartment."

"Did you kill him?"

"Signore."

"Rose, just give me one minute. Close your eyes and try to relax. You're safe."

"Who's there?"

"Signore, beyond your new… ally, I have news of great urgency

to discuss with you."

"Dante, I haven't seen you in over a year. You finally decide to drop by, and you can't give me two minutes?"

"A year is nothing to you."

"That's not the point."

"Did you say Dante?" Rose said.

Gervais came back into the room, holding the severed head.

Dante saw the head, Rose saw Gervais. He wasn't broadcasting his aura, so I don't know how she knew who he was, but she did.

"Landon?" She started trying to get up, her body fighting her mind.

"Landon?" Dante was staring at the head, growing angry at who was holding it.

"Rose, wait. It's okay. He isn't going to hurt you. Dante, just give me a damn minute."

"This is bullshit," Rose said. She'd managed to get her hand to the knife I'd given her. She fell off the couch trying to get at Gervais.

"Was it as good for you as it could have been for me?" Gervais asked.

I threw out my energy, slamming it into him and driving him to the ground. "You shut the hell up."

He started laughing.

I helped Rose off the floor. She twisted and yanked herself away from me, spinning and slashing with the knife.

"You asshole. I trusted you. You're supposed to help me."

"I am helping you."

She was unsteady on her feet. "Are you kidding me?"

"Children, enough." Dante raised his hand, and Rose fell back to the couch, out cold.

I jabbed my finger at Dante. "If you can't help me with the important stuff, don't help me with this."

He already looked old, and somehow his face aged another fifty years.

"No, I suppose I can't help you, signore. I came to warn you about the angels. It appears my warning was too late."

His sad-old-dog look calmed my own temper. "You're too late to tell me that they're building robots. Do you have anything else?"

"They've recruited a mortal."

"Matthias Zheng."

He seemed surprised I knew the name. “Yes. Who told you?”

“Valerix, via Randolph Hearst. This is a problem for demons, too.” I pointed at Gervais, who was sitting up on the floor. “Even this one.”

“Especially this one,” he said. “It should please you that I’m not what I used to be, poet. Not by any shot at all.”

“Yes, I can see that. Alichino told me a new demon had been sent through a rift. If I had known it was you, that your soul had survived, I would have paid more attention to the news.”

“I don’t want to work with him either,” I said. “The fact is he has some skills that may be useful, and he knows as much about fighting angels as anyone. This is kind of new ground for me.” Ground I had been dreading having to traverse. As long as it remained a matter of busting up some machines, it wouldn’t be a problem.

Gervais finished getting back to his feet. “You can be useful, too, my Lord. ” The last two words were sarcastic, mocking. “Someone needs to examine this. To see if it has any weaknesses. To determine what it is made of.”

“I don’t take orders from you,” Dante said.

“Of course you don’t, you old fool. You’re probably so ignorant that you’d rather not do what I suggest just so you can not listen to me.”

I could tell Dante was fuming. He remained silent while I took the head from Gervais and handed it to him. “Can you bring this back with you?”

He shook his head. “No, signore. I will have to bring Alichino back to examine it. I can carry it to his old workshop in Brazil and drop him there.” He glared at Gervais. “Only because you are asking, and because it is the logical next step. Agents of Heaven that can attack without provocation, that are armored against demonic claws and teeth… This is an escalation that cannot be allowed to occur.”

“It’s more than that,” I said. “This thing shot bolts at me. They’ve miniaturized the scripture or something. The entire blessing fits on a small projectile.”

“It is worse than I realized. Let us not waste any more time on old wounds. The balance is of the utmost priority.”

He vanished.

“Always a pleasure,” Gervais called out. “Old windbag.”

“How did you and Josette turn out so different?” I said it softly, not expecting the comment to be heard or answered.

“It is simple, diuscrucis. She always believed that no matter what occurred in the mortal life, God would lift her into His Kingdom of light, beauty, and eternal happiness. I always believed that if you want something, you need to take it. That is the only way you are guaranteed a chance to achieve the kingdom you desire.” He chuckled softly. “You know what that Kingdom did to her, don’t you? You know how it used her, just as much as I used her. I never pretended to be something I wasn’t. I never kept a hidden agenda. Not from her.

“Can you say the same for Heaven?”

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I kicked Gervais out of my apartment so I could deal with Rose. His parting words lingered in the back of my mind, his laughter tracking behind it the entire time. Regardless of what the demon thought, Josette had never regretted her decision to return to Earth as an angel. She had always trusted in God's path, and she walked it with humility wherever it took her.

Even her death, her final death, was dignified.

Gervais didn't know the difference. He would always grasp for material power, and never understand the true strength of spirit. It's what made him such an asshole.

"Rose."

I was leaning over her, ready to hold her still if she woke as angry as she had been when Dante knocked her out.

Her eyes fluttered and opened. "Landon." A tear pooled in her eye. "I don't understand."

"I was attacked in the alley. By the seraphim, the angels. By a construction of mortal engineering and Divine power. I would have died, if he hadn't helped me."

“What?”

“They can’t sense me, Rose. They don’t know who or where I am unless I’m in direct line of sight. I was in a dark alley, between two buildings. How did they know I was there?”

She was looking up at me from the couch. Her breath hung. “Are you suggesting I betrayed you?”

“I’m asking.”

“No. I didn’t tell anyone. I’m not working with them.”

I watched her eyes. I didn’t have my Divine truth-telling mojo anymore, but it was a crutch that was too easy to be fooled by, and a power I didn’t need. I was smarter. More experienced. I could read the signs better.

She was telling the truth.

“I believe you. How are you feeling?”

“I… I’m not sure. He did something to me. It felt good, really good, but in a bad, bad way. I’m trying to deal with it, trying to work it out. I don’t feel violated, or dirty. Just… confused. A little dizzy, like a bad hangover. All of this is happening so fast.” She squeezed her eyes closed, and the tears flowed from behind the lids. “I don’t know if I can do this. I wanted to find you. I wanted to be part of this. You let him live. You brought him back here with you. He’s killed how many girls? Anita… She was innocent. She never hurt anybody. He…“

She trailed off. Opened her eyes. Looked up at me, the fire and anger replacing the pain. Her voice was quiet venom.

“How could you?”

I was calm. I had expected this, and worse. “I told you. I was attacked. He saved my life.”

“One life saved, and how many taken? He doesn’t deserve to live.”

“No, he doesn’t. It isn’t that simple. The balance… it’s never that simple.”

The anger cooled a little. She shifted her head, as though getting a different angle would let her see deeper into me. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

I was impressed that she saw it.

“I know him. His name is Gervais.”

We talked for a long time. I told her everything. How he captured and raped his own sister so that she would give birth to a true crossbreed, a mortal whose potential dwarfed that of any angel

or demon. How he sided with the Beast to get to her. How he killed my friends. I told her everything I could think of. It took hours. Not because I had planned to. Not because I thought she needed to know it all. She had enough to try to make sense of already, and I was only adding to it.

Except I found that once I started talking, I couldn't stop. I found that there was no god-power that could salve the pain of what I had endured. Of what I held inside.

She listened. Despite her own pain, she listened. She didn't speak, she didn't move. She sat and absorbed the words without question or judgement.

By the time I was done, my own face was wet with tears. I had spent time alone to recover after defeating the Beast, and I had cried for Charis and Clara, for my friends, and for the thousands of others who had died at his hand.

Two years.

It was the first time I had cried for myself.

When it was over, when my emotions were spent, we sat together in comfortable silence. At some point, she reached out and took my hand in hers, and I focused on that connection, that simple human affection. That basic, primal comfort.

"I understand," she said a while later.

"Understand?"

"Why you didn't kill him. I don't like it, but I understand."

"It's going to get worse. What the angels are doing… You can still change your mind about helping me. I didn't hold up my end."

There was no hesitation.

"I'm not changing my mind. The things that are out there… I get that the angels want to help, and think they're helping, and I like the idea of getting rid of demons. To trade the many for the few? Anita wasn't a believer. Neither was I, before all of this. I don't think that made us bad people, and at the same time we would have been left for food when the Rapture happened. Now that I *do* believe in God… I'm not convinced He's got the right idea." She smiled and squeezed my hand. "Besides, you need someone to watch your back. To make sure this Gervais doesn't stick something in it."

I laughed at that. "Do I need to watch his? To make sure you don't stick something in it?"

"No. Not as long as you need him. Since Anita died, everything

that has happened, it's made me stronger than I ever thought I could be. Strong enough to deal with the demon who killed her. I never imagined I would say that."

"I felt the same way after I died."

She laughed and leaned in, kissing me softly on the cheek.

"I'm going to go back to my room, have something to eat, and try to get used to all of this. Goodnight, Landon."

"Goodnight, Rose. Thank you for understanding."

She got up and walked out.

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I had a trick up my sleeve that allowed me to cover large distances faster than conventional air travel. I knew it would be necessary, a counter to the angels' globe-hopping airspeed, or the demons' use of transport rifts. In simple terms, I could use my power to destroy a pocket of space-time in front of me and recreate it behind me, essentially folding space. The trouble was that I could only use it for myself, and it generally left me disoriented and tired when I came out the other side. It was the stretch at the very edge of my limits.

As a result, we lost most of the next day catching a flight from JFK to LAX. As promised, Rose was neutral around Gervais. Not happy, not warm. She didn't speak a word to him, but she didn't try to stab him either. The demon returned her ignorance with ambivalence, staying fairly quiet himself and only making an occasional rude comment.

The flight was tense and awkward. I wound up in the center seat, with Rose on the aisle and Gervais against the window, to keep the demon from having easy access to the attendants. He must have fed after he left the apartment, because he was looking

healthier and stronger. More like himself.

I hated it.

We landed six hours later, a car already waiting at the airport to take us to Valerix's home near the coast. It was late evening, warm, and dry.

"I can't remember the last time I was in California," Gervais said. "Eighteen forty-nine, perhaps? That was a fun vacation."

We were in a stretch limo, on our way to pay the archfiend a visit.

The demon turned to me. "Did you know Valerix was already establishing her territory back then? Ah, she was a spit-fire. You'll never meet another demon who is better with a sword." He paused, took a swig from the champagne bottle he'd found, and smiled. "Except for me, of course."

"Of course."

"We dueled. Not with swords, with pistols. Did you know that? We couldn't do any permanent damage. We had a fresh crop of virgins. So young. So delicious. And a bet."

Rose was sitting against the window, keeping her eyes locked on the scenery. I saw her face tighten as she tried to ignore him.

"I need a name for myself," he said. "You have the vampires, the werewolves, the nightstalkers. You have your devils and your succubi. I'm the only one of my kind right now, so I should get to decide what I am called, should I not?"

He took another pull from the bottle.

"Can you shut up?" I asked.

He put his hand on my shoulder. "Oh, come now, Landon." He laughed and looked past me. "Or do you want to, again?"

Her head whipped around, and the blessed knife I had given her was in her hand almost before I could grab her wrist.

"Rrraawwrrrrr." He stuck his tongue out at her, and then ran it around his mouth.

"Just ignore him," I said.

She relaxed, put the knife away, and returned her gaze to the window.

"It's all in good fun." He laughed again, and finished the champagne. He held the bottle out and looked down at the label. "That was disgusting."

I was wondering how much I really needed him when the limo turned onto a long, narrow driveway.

We were there.

He drove us up to a large, wrought iron gate, where a man in a dark suit waited. Not a man, a were. He approached the driver's side as we came to a stop.

"Don't ruin my surprise," Gervais said. He changed form, back to Peter. "I'm just another of your new recruits."

"The Mistress wasn't expecting nobody," the were said. Like most weres, his voice was deep and rough.

"I have a Mr. Hamilton here to see her," the driver replied. "He said she's expecting him."

"I don't know that name." A wire was running to his ear. He leaned into it. "This is Jackson. I got a Mr. Hamilton here to see you." He listened for a few seconds, then leaned down, sticking his head into the driver's side window. He looked back at me. I could see his nostrils flare as he caught my scent, and recognized that I was different. "You ain't alone."

"My associates," I said. "Anything Valerix has to say to me, she can say in front of them."

He pulled his head out. "Yeah, it's him, I guess. Smells funny. He's got two others in the car with him. Nah, they're human." He paused. "Yeah, okay." He raised his hand and motioned in a circle. The gate started to open.

The driver eased through. The other side started with a large, open field and ended with a circular driveway with a huge, twisted fountain in the center, a brutal, carved depiction of chaos and violence. It was a good reference for what I thought Hell probably looked like.

Behind the fountain was a large, white, columned mansion, with a huge colonnade and lots of dark tinted windows. There were a dozen small steps leading up to a huge door, which was nicked and dented with thousands of runes.

Protection from angels.

The car stopped and the driver got out, circling around and opening the door for us. Gervais exited first, his balance a little unsteady, and he leaned against the car to keep himself upright. I followed, and took Rose's hand to help her out of the car.

"Thank you," she said softly.

I answered with a smile, and turned back to the doorway.

I could see her there, on the other side of the threshold. She was half-bathed in shadow; a fiery-haired, green-eyed beauty of a

woman. Her skin was porcelain, her clasped hands ending in long, nimble fingers. She was wearing a short red leather skirt and a silk blouse, with gem-encrusted sandals on her feet that twinkled in the moonlight.

Two more weres came down to greet us.

She stayed behind the doors.

She was afraid.

"She's only gotten hotter," Gervais whispered.

"What did you say?" one of the weres asked.

"It sure is hot out here." He started giggling. Had he known the booze would go to his head? I couldn't believe this was the same demon who had nearly stolen away the Beast's power.

"Mistress Valerix welcomes you," the other were said, stopping in front of me and moving into a sweeping bow. "Please, accept her invitation as an honored guest in her home."

"I accept," I said, staying upright. "I expect my companions will be afforded the same honor?"

The were huffed. "Of course."

"Peter, Rose, let's go."

I started walking, leaving them behind me. It was the proper decorum for meeting with an archfiend. If it had just been Rose, I wouldn't have bothered.

I heard a grunt behind me.

"Damn it," Rose cursed.

I turned around. Gervais had started to fall, and she had caught him. She held him like a dirty diaper, trying to keep him upright and touch him as little as possible.

I caught her eyes in mine.

"Go," she said. "I've got him."

She set her jaw and put his arm over her shoulders, helping him walk. I could only imagine how hard it was for her.

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“Diuscrucis.” Valerix held out her hand, palm down so I could kiss it. Now that I was closer, I could see her eyes were cat’s eyes, bright and predatory, tapering at the edges in an interesting and physically appealing way. She was an archfiend, which meant she had once been human, a human so evil that Lucifer allowed her to leave Hell to regain our world as her almost immortal playground.

I could see one of the ways she had risen to power.

“Valerix.”

She looked past me. “Is your companion well?”

“Peter? He’ll be fine.”

She laughed. “Peter. A very… godly name.”

“I’m not on a side. You know that.”

“Yes, of course. The Great Equalizer. Since you’re here, I assume you got my message.”

“And then some.”

“Do tell.”

“Once we’re all inside. I’m guessing you have those wards on the door, and won’t come away from them, for a reason.”

“I’ve put myself at great risk for you, diuscrucis.”

Rose reached the doorway, still helping Gervais along.

“Good evening, Miss…”

“Rose. Just Rose.” She looked back at the demon, and I could tell she was trying to quell her fear. She would be able to feel Valerix’s aura, an aura that was likely much stronger than anything she had already encountered, even in passing.

Valerix’s eyes ran the length of her body, an act that was anything but innocent. “Rose. By any other name, would you be as sweet?”

“I’m Peter,” Gervais said, blurting it out. He shifted in Rose’s arms. “I think I’m going to be sick.” His face paled, and his stomach made a horrible gurgling noise.

Valerix looked horrified. “Take the sheep up to one of the guest rooms,” she said to one of the weres. “Do not hurt him.”

“Sheep?” Rose said.

“Baaaaa!” Gervais laughed. “Baaaa!”

“Come on.” The were grabbed him roughly and pulled him away from Rose. She looked thankful to be rid of him. “I’ll bring him upstairs.”

“Landon, if you will.” Valerix turned, walking ahead of us. The second were pulled the doors closed, and then lifted a heavy slab of iron across to reinforce it.

“Sheep?” Rose whispered to me, coming to walk at my side.

“You’re human. She only sees you as food, or a toy. For now.”

We kept walking, following Valerix down a marbled hallway and into a large sitting room. It was modern, with square, white leather furniture and huge, minimalist canvases lining the walls.

“Your companion,” she said. “He is-”

“A little rough around the edges.”

“Why did you bring them here? What do you hope to gain by consorting with mortals? They will only get in your way. Make you soft.”

“That’s a demonic perspective if I’ve ever heard one. Have you forgotten what your own human spirit was like?”

“I remember my desire to hear how other spirits beg and scream.”

“Watch your tongue, Valerix,” I said, taking an aggressive step towards her. “You invited us in. Have some respect.”

She pursed her lips, bristling at being challenged in her own

home. I don't know how much she feared me, but she feared the bigger picture enough to back down. "My apologies, Rose. I don't spend much time around sh… mortals, these days. I have forgotten my platitudes."

"Apology accepted," Rose said.

The answer made her bristle more. Her face flushed, and her eyes burned. "Please, sit. Make yourselves comfortable. Would you like some tea?"

"We can skip the polite hostess part." I took a seat on a cream colored sofa. Rose chose a white, gothic looking chair, declaring her independence from me. It was a smart choice. "You have information."

Valerix sat on the love seat opposite the couch. Her leather skirt rode up as she dropped, an intentional maneuver to try to entice me, or maybe Rose, with a sneak peek.

I knew how to play the game. My eyes stayed on her face.

She smirked. "Hearst told you about Matthias Zheng?"

"Yes. I've already seen the fruits of his labor."

Her eyebrows lifted. "What?"

"The machine. The angels threw it at me last night."

"And you survived?" Was she disappointed, or excited?

"Human spirit."

"I've seen the fruits of their labor, too. They dropped that thing into a vampire nest. Over a hundred vampires against one. You can guess who won."

"That's why you warded your door?"

"The entire house, underneath the wallpaper. I spent six days without interruption inscribing it myself, wondering every minute if they would show up with their weapon before I was done."

"Why would they target you?"

"They know I contacted you. That I tried to warn you. I also may have… detained, one of their Touched. He was a boastful sh… man. Certain that the 'Fists of God' would destroy our kind once and for all. I enjoyed bl…" She caught herself and glanced at Rose, and then returned her attention to me. "Oh, and you."

Fists of God? It was a cool name. I wasn't too happy about the plural.

"They're tough, but not indestructible. We decapitated one. I've got someone studying the scripture as we speak."

"Templars?"

“No. Since the Beast was destroyed, the few that were left have faded into the background. A scientist. Speaking of which, Randolph mentioned that Zheng is immune to Divine power.”

“It is an oddity, isn’t it? I sent my most powerful sex demons to meet him. Their power did nothing. I sent them back with a glamour I placed myself, changing their appearance completely. He saw right through it. He has no Divine aura, so I know he’s mortal. Even stranger - he acted like he didn’t know they were demons.”

I was silent while I considered it. Gervais could disguise his aura. Was it possible Zheng was a demon, or had been replaced by a demon?

A well-placed rift would make for fast travel. Was it possible Gervais was Zheng? I couldn’t rule it out.

I got to my feet. “If you could excuse me for a minute. I need to check on Peter.”

Valerix stood, confused. “We weren’t done with our conversation.”

“We can pick it up in a minute. Can you have your dog lead me to where you stashed him?”

She didn’t look happy. “Zel, will you please escort the diuscrucis upstairs.”

“What’s going on?” Rose asked, also rising from her chair.

“I just want to check on Peter. I trust Valerix will be a gracious host while I’m gone.” I eyed the archfiend. Her eyes flared red.

“Of course. Please, Rose. Sit. Do you like designer handbags?”

Rose didn’t look happy either. “No. I like knives.”

Valerix smiled and ran her tongue against her lips. “Well then, I have something to show you, I think you’re going to love.”

“This way,” the were, Zel, said, motioning me towards the door.

I started following. We made it halfway to the door when something outside caused the whole building to shake. A moment later, Zel reached up to his earpiece.

“Mistress, there are angels outside.”

Valerix hissed. “Why now?”

“Maybe they know I’m here?” I said.

“How would they? You only arrived a few minutes ago.”

It couldn’t have been Rose, she was with me the entire time. Gervais on the other hand…

The mansion shook again. I heard a faint scream from outside.

“Zel, send out the alarm. We need to be ready in case the wards

don’t hold. Do they have any Fists with them?”

The were growled and shook his head. “I don’t know, Mistress. I’m not getting any reports from the outer security.”

Valerix hissed again and hurried out of the room.

“Are you ready for this?” I asked Rose on our way out behind her.

“No.” She drew a cursed knife. “I don’t want to kill the good guys.”

“You should never *want* to kill anything. Just remember, if they win, all of this is gone, and only the few will be going someplace better.”

“I know.”

We trailed the archfiend out into the hallway, the building shaking every few seconds. If Gervais was behind this, if he was double-crossing me for the angels, he wouldn’t be doing it for much longer.

We reached the foyer, coming into sight of the warded door.

The other were, the one who had brought Gervais up to his room, was standing next to it.

He had just pulled it open.

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“Elyx!” Valerix shouted. The were looked towards her, hopping aside as a gout of hellfire launched from her fingers towards him. He turned and galloped towards the stairs, bounding up them at full speed, vanishing from sight in a matter of seconds. “You’ll spend eternity in Hell for this, you flea ridden mongrel!”

“Get down!” I grabbed the archfiend with my hands, at the same time I threw my power into Rose and pulled both of them to the ground.

The seal of the wards broken, the door flew open and six of the bolts whizzed through the air above us. I heard them buzz past and slam into the wall.

The Fist came in behind the volley, extending the wrist-mounted blades and charging like a bull. I pushed the energy into my muscles and rolled to where Rose was laying face-down. I got her aside even as the machine and another blast of hellfire converged on the spot. The blue runes on the Fist’s surface grew brighter while the fire poured into it, absorbing the heat and energy. The blade retracted from its right hand, which adjusted to face Valerix and

angled back so the palm was out.

A blue beam of light launched from it, striking Valerix full in the chest. She had two seconds to scream, and then she vanished in a pile of ash.

"Oh my god," Rose said, her voice cracking with fear.

I pulled the stone from my pocket and summoned the obsidian blade, throwing myself forward at the Fist's back, bringing the blade up to make a hard stroke on its vulnerable neck.

Its hand swung around, cuffing me in the shoulder, catching my momentum and redirecting me. I braced myself and slammed hard into one of the warded windows and then through, hitting the pavement and rolling to a stop against the base of the fountain. I healed myself as quickly as I could and got back on my feet. I could hear the Fist moving, and it stormed out the front door in pursuit.

At least it had ignored Rose.

"Landon."

A voice from behind me. A voice I knew. I turned around.

"Adam?"

He was standing on the other side of the fountain, flanked by three angels on each side. His handsome face was sharp and serious, his long, golden hair falling in waves across broad, muscular shoulders. My eyes trailed down them to the white toga the angels preferred, to the reddish gold clasp that identified him as the Inquisitor Prime, to his right arm.

Gervais' undead demons had broken the arm during the fight to destroy the Beast. It was a unique wound, not wholly demonic, a wound that I knew would never heal. A wound he had overcome.

"Why?" I asked him, staring at the arm. It was metal, like the Fist now standing still behind me, and also covered in glowing scripture. It had been fused to his skin just above the elbow, the mechanic actuators visible beneath his forearm. He extended the fingers and closed them back into a fist, showing off the prosthetic.

"Why? Landon… I'm sorry, my friend. I have nothing but respect for you, but what did you expect? Your existence is a problem for us. It's even more of a problem now, because we've developed a tool to finally rid the world of demons."

"That thing is going to lead to the downfall of man."

"Not all men. The believers will be brought home. You know that."

"How many is that? How many are left behind? Three billion?

Four?”

“It is His infallible wish.”

“Did He tell you that?”

“We are His children. We know His will.”

“So He’s okay with you circumventing the rules of engagement?”

“He allowed us to have the idea, and He provided the means.”

“You’re reaching.”

“I haven’t fallen yet. What does that tell you? This isn’t something I want to do. It’s something I have to do.”

“Again, why? Why you? Shouldn’t you be out capturing lost artifacts?”

He laughed. “I wish I were. After the Blades were destroyed, the archangels gave me a new task. ‘Discover a way to defeat the diuscrucis.’ Those were the exact words. I did, though you’ve been a hard man to find.”

“It helps to have a demon on your side.”

“It is uncommon, but there are a few who are willing to trade their services for the promise of forgiveness.”

Gervais? After everything, would Heaven bargain his soul?

“Anyway, my friend, I came to give you a chance to save yourself. To save your soul. God forgives all who repent.”

It was my turn to laugh. “You want me to repent? To screw over the rest of mankind? Are you serious?” He was. I knew he was. “Forget it. You already got one of your toys back with its head ripped off. It’s fine by me if you want to keep adding to my collection.”

He looked at me. I didn’t see any conflict, though I did see regret. He was being honest when he said he didn’t want to.

We both knew that wasn’t enough.

I spun around, throwing my hands out, directing the energy. The Fist’s bolts came in fast, in a wide enough spread to hit me no matter which way I turned.

Thankfully, I didn’t need to turn.

I focused on the power, splitting it into six distinct streams, using them as funnels to capture the bolts, dropping to the ground and spinning on my knees, redirecting them around me and through the cascading mist of the fountain.

Into the angels.

One bolt for each of Adam’s companions. They slammed into

them, disappearing in an explosion of blood and the heavy crack of bone. All six of the angels fell back, reaching for the metal that was buried in them. It was blessed, it couldn't kill them. It did keep them otherwise occupied. More importantly, it showed Adam I wasn't about to give any quarter.

He didn't move. He didn't react. His artificial limb flexed, fingers tapping a strange cadence. The Fist was coming hard.

I gathered myself and leaped away from it, backwards over the fountain, twisting in mid-air, summoning the obsidian blade. I cleared the grotesque centerpiece and angled downwards towards Adam, leading with the sword.

He had a sword of his own, and it appeared in his hand just in time for him to backstep and parry my attack. I landed and pressed in, flooding my muscles with the power, slamming my sword against his. He was good, very good. He wasn't as good as Josette had made me.

"What do you hope to gain by this?" he asked, backpedaling with each new stroke, his face twisted in concentration.

"I was hoping I could convince you to surrender."

His wings unfurled behind him and he bounced backwards, using them to carry him further and faster. I sprung after, covering the distance in one strong leap.

"I can't, Landon. This is His will. Break the diuscrucis, break the balance, win the war."

"You saw what happened in Mumbai. When you win… the entire world will be like that."

He turned and lashed out with a wing, getting more desperate as I continued pressing, the black spatha whistling through the air in combinations of cuts and jabs. I took the hit off my shoulder, planting myself to keep from being thrown aside. He managed to slow my attack long enough to get a couple of breaths.

"All of His children have the opportunity to ask Him for forgiveness and pledge themselves, up until the very moment of the Rapture. The ones who don't…" His face tightened. "They will get what they have asked for. A world without Him."

I let him block me again. This time, I reached out with my power, pulling the ground behind him, raising enough earth that he stumbled on his next backstep and lost his balance.

His wings spread and twisted. He shot into the sky, just barely escaping my reach. The blessed end of the blade caught his

abdomen, cutting through the toga and leaving a thin line of blood that trailed him upwards.

I noticed that the fingers on the metal hand were still moving.

I ducked just in time to avoid the Fist's heavy blade, turned and smacked against it with the spatha. As before, the scripture flared, making the blow of the razor sharp artifact more like a stick against a stone. I knew from the first fight that the joints were vulnerable, so I changed my tactics even as I rolled away from it.

It followed after, twin blades making alternating stabs, torso turning independent of its legs to follow me more quickly. Its form was shit, its approach pure brute force. I could duck and weave for a while to keep it away. Eventually, I would get weary.

I doubted that it would.

I pushed out with my power, shoving the arm out and bringing the cursed side of the blade down towards the joint. It was smarter this time, and it shifted just enough to move the joint out of line, leaving the stroke to bounce off the scripture. It followed up the bold attack with a solid kick to the ribs that sent me tumbling, and left them shattered under my skin.

"You can still repent," Adam said, from his position fifty feet over my head. "He'll forgive you."

Angels. They were all about forgiveness, love, charity. When it suited them. Otherwise, they were more than willing to throw you aside.

I could hardly breathe, but I didn't bother healing myself. The Fist was coming for me.

If Divine weapons were ineffective, maybe I needed a different approach.

I took a deep breath, steadying myself on my knees in front of the onrushing machine. I reached out with the energy, casting it like a massive net.

Then I pulled.

The twisted artwork of the marble fountain cracked as it was yanked from its base and sent hurtling in my direction. I followed the path and clenched my muscles, as though that could somehow give me more leverage with the energy to better direct the heavy stone missile. Maybe it did. Maybe it didn't. The end result was the same.

It slammed into the Fist, not four feet from where I was kneeling. Both objects met in an echoing collision. Both objects

went airborne for a few seconds. Then the sculpture came down on the machine, twisting and crushing it beneath the weight.

It didn't get back up.

I flopped onto my back, bringing my sword up to defend myself from Adam. He wasn't coming after me. He floated above me, looking down and shaking his head. A moment later, the other six angels joined him.

They all left together. As they did, I could swear I saw him smile.

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22

I found Rose waiting for me inside the mansion. She was sitting on the floor, her back pressed against the wall, her blessed knife laying on the ground between her legs.

It was bloody.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I’m fine. Happy to see that all that training paid off, even against werewolves.” She pointed towards a pile of dust a dozen feet away. “After that thing chased you outside, Valerix’s servant thought it might be fun to try to rape me. It didn’t turn out the way he planned.” She smiled. “I saw the fight. The best part, anyway. I’m impressed. What was with the cyborg angel?”

I couldn’t hold back my smile, and I felt a bit of heat rising to my cheeks. “Thanks.” I held out my hand and helped her to her feet. “His name is Adam. He’s the Inquisitor Prime, which in simple terms means he runs Heavenly Special Ops. We were allies against the Beast.”

“He’s pretty handsome.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“So are you, in your own way.”

More heat. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She laughed. The adrenaline had left her a little giddy. “I don’t know… he’s a male Thor kind of handsome. You’re more like a James Bond, or Captain America.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t just call me Captain America.”

“Or James Bond. Somewhere in there. It works for you.”

“Thanks, I guess. Have you seen Gervais?”

“Not since the were took him away. Do you think he’s in trouble?”

We started for the stairs. “I know he’s in trouble. I’m going to wring his damn neck.”

Neither of us knew the layout of the place, so it took us some time to wander through all the hallways and check each room for the demon. It wasn’t enough to just peek inside, we had to look in the closets, under the beds; anywhere he might have decided to hide after I crushed the Fist. I could picture him watching the confrontation with Adam from one of the windows, the quiet of the room interrupted from time to time by his annoying french giggle. He’d played me for a fool.

The last door we hit wasn’t a single room. It was Valerix’s suite. It fed into a massive bedroom with a four-posted double-king bed as its centerpiece, draped in red velvet and silk with various different leather straps and chains positioned along the sides of the posts. Thick fur rugs lined the floor around it, and four candled chandeliers hung above. To the left of it was an open bathroom, decorated in black marble and leather. To the right, an office.

Gervais was sitting behind the desk, his feet up on the mahogany, a big smile on his face.

“Ah, there you are, Landon.”

Just the sight of him made my temper flare. I threw out the energy, slamming it into him and launching him backwards. He lost his balance on the chair, and wound up laying on the floor.

I rushed into the room, vaulting the desk and landing on top of him, my hands around his throat.

“Ouch,” he said, looking up at me. He didn’t seem very concerned about his predicament. “You’re angry with me for not helping you against the machine?”

“You sold me out to the angels, you son of a bitch.”

He started laughing.

“What the hell is so funny?”

He laughed harder.

I squeezed harder.

He tapped on my forearms, and pointed to the desk. There was a laptop there. The screen was on.

I let go of him.

He coughed twice and got up, rubbing at his neck. “For one, you should know me better than to think I would ever join forces with those buffoons. For another, you’re welcome.”

A photo of Matthias Zheng was on the screen, along with the beginnings of a full profile. “You didn’t let them in?”

“Of course not. I feigned my drunkenness so I could get into Valerix’s office. It was her were that ratted you out. The idiot came up here after he opened the door. He wanted the very thing that you’re looking at right now.”

“Why?”

“I imagine to keep anyone else from seeing it. It seems that our minx did quite a bit of digging and spying on Mr. Zheng. She was trying to both figure out the reason for his Divine immunity, and determine where the angels had taken him.”

“And?”

“And the information is incomplete. She never did learn the secret to his immunity, and she lost his trail a week ago.”

I skimmed through the data on the screen. Matthias Zheng, born Xin Zheng. The only son of Bo and Celia Zheng, an accountant and a housewife from San Diego. Finished high school at age twelve, graduated with a doctorate in engineering and robotics at sixteen. Not married, no kids, apparently no friends either.

A real nerd.

According to the file, Valerix had tracked him to a safe house in San Francisco. Then the fiend that was following him disappeared.

I turned my attention from the computer to Gervais, who had climbed back into the chair. It was possible that he was still playing me. That he had opened the door in the form of the were, and then come back up here to play innocent. It was also possible that he was telling the truth. The data on the screen couldn’t have been manufactured in the last ten minutes.

“You left me out there to fight that thing on my own.”

“You had Rose to help you.”

“No offense to her, but she’s not exactly ready to take on a Fist

of God. You, on the other hand-"

"I would have been splattered against the dirt. I caught the… Fist, is it?… in the alley off-guard. I disposed of the were for you, and I got into Valerix's computer to get this information. It isn't as though I've just been sitting here twiddling my thumbs."

"I could have been killed, and we could have just asked her for this stuff. You should have been downstairs with us."

"Don't be stupid. She may have been afraid, but she was still a demon. There would have been some kind of bargain involved. This way was more efficient, and it all worked out for the best. Maybe when we're done, I'll come back and claim this territory."

"You don't have the strength to claim the west coast. And if you try, I'll kill you myself."

Gervais grinned. "I will keep that under consideration."

"What's our next move?" Rose asked, interrupting us.

I turned the screen so she could see it. "You know how technology is. You start with a prototype, a proof of concept. Then you iterate. You make improvements, you fix weaknesses. He's the one supplying the technology. We need to find him before he has a chance to make these Fists any stronger than they already are." I picked up the laptop and handed it to her. "Your other job is to see what else you can learn from the data Valerix collected, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"If you don't mind," Gervais parroted behind me, raising his voice in pitch. "Not at all." He got up off the chair and walked out ahead of us. "We have what we need. Can we go?"

I glared at Gervais' back as he left the room. I needed to keep a closer eye on the demon.

"Let's get out of here before Adam decides he wants a rematch," Rose said.

I couldn't have agreed more.

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23

We needed to get from L.A. to San Francisco. A plane would have been an obvious choice, but a plane meant going airborne, and airborne meant angels. While we weren't giving off any kind of Divine aura, and Adam would have forgotten about our confrontation by now, I was still feeling skittish about the risk. I could survive a fall, even from thirty-thousand feet. Gervais probably could, too. Not that I cared. Rose on the other hand…

So we drove. We were fortunate that Valerix had a nice collection in a large garage in the back of the property, a cavernous expanse of black Escalades and Camaros for her small Turned army and her vampire and were henchmen, most of whom had fled the scene at the sight of the Fist. We found one of them hiding behind the door of the locked room where they kept the keys. She tried to knife me on my way in, and was rewarded with a blow to the head that would leave her at rest for a few more hours.

Growing up in the city, I'd never cared much for driving. Rose's eyes lit up when I offered her the keys, and she hopped in on the driver's side without hesitation, quickly adjusting the mirrors and

seat.

"I've always wanted to drive one of these things," she said.

She pulled us out of the garage and onto a narrow road that led around to the front of the mansion to the main driveway. When we reached it, I noticed that the broken bit of the fountain was still laying on the grass. The Fist was gone from beneath it.

"How do you think they managed that?" Gervais asked.

I didn't know he had actually seen any of the fight.

"Some kind of self-destruct?" Rose said.

I reached out with my power, pushing hard and shoving the marble away. The ground beneath it was black, as though the Fist had burned up. There was no sign of any dust to mark its disintegration.

"Probably. I can imagine they don't want anyone getting their hands on it."

"We have the head," Gervais said. "And they carried the rest of it away."

"That one wasn't too badly damaged. Maybe they thought they could fix it up. If the destruction mechanism is in the body, severing the head would keep it intact."

Gervais kept his eyes on the spot, examining it. "Burned to nothing? No ash? No dust?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"I don't know. A thought, only."

"Care to share?"

He looked at me and smiled. "No."

"Maybe I should rephrase that. Tell me."

"You can't Command me, diuscrucis."

"No, but I can kill you."

He leaned back on the plush leather seat. "Stop the car."

Rose hit the brakes. Gervais jumped out and walked over to the dark circle in the ground. He knelt down and wiped his finger along it, and then lifted it up for me to examine.

"Sulfer?"

"Someone took it."

"Who?"

"What do I look like? A demon powerful enough to sneak in here and send it through a Hell rift in the thirty minutes we were in the house."

"Don't you need runes for a Hell rift?"

He nodded and walked around the scorch marks. He stopped on the other side and pawed at the dirt. “Here. They scratched it out when it was done.”

“What’s a Hell rift?” Rose asked.

“A portal,” Gervais replied. “A transport mechanism. You can guess where it goes.”

Her face paled.

“How do you think we get here?” he said.

“If the rift is here, why didn’t the statue go through?” Rose said.

“It isn’t Divine. It would need to have been held or touched by a demon to make the trip,” I said. I turned to Gervais. “So, they brought the body back to Hell. They’re going to try to reverse engineer it. They’re going to try to make their own.”

“They won’t be able to fully reproduce it. You crushed most of it,” Gervais said.

“Future plots aside, it means someone was either following us, or following Adam.” I eyed the demon again. “It seems there have been a lot of strange coincidences since I picked you up.”

“It is what it is. That isn’t my fault, though I can’t deny the circumstantial evidence. Leave me here, if you want. Kill me. I still have information. Information you won’t get.”

I walked across the center of the abandoned rift. “Which could be just another misdirection so that I’ll bring you along. I figured you had some value, and it was better to keep an eye on you. Now… I’m not so sure.”

I summoned the spatha, the black blade appearing only inches from Gervais’ neck.

“Wait,” he said. He put his hand on the side of the sword and pushed the tip off his throat. “I’ll give you a name. A token of faith.”

“No. You could give me any name. You know we don’t have time to go chasing some random fiend right now.”

“What do you want from me, diuscrucis? I’m trying to help you in this.”

“You don’t help anyone without getting something in return. Is that it?” I pointed back at the rift. “Or maybe you just wanted to get Valerix out of the way? What’s your game, Gervais?”

“Just kill him and be done with it,” Rose said. “Whatever small way he can help can’t compare to having to put up with his smell.”

“Thank you,” Gervais said, glaring at her. “Of course there’s a

game. You know as well as anyone that there always is. It took some time for the dust to settle once you defeated the Beast, and now the pieces are all starting to shift and move again. Heaven has made the first maneuver. Should it surprise you that Hell has an interest, the same way that I have an interest? They can't count on you coming out on top. I, on the other hand, have cast my lot with you. I didn't call Adam here. I have nothing to do with whoever took what was left of the Fist."

He was a consummate liar. A perfect manipulator.

"Your words don't mean anything."

"I have one that will."

"Do you?"

"Abaddon."

I felt my body turn cold. "What about him?"

"The summoning is to bring Abaddon back from Hell. Lucifer won't let him out, and the rifts aren't strong enough to carry him."

"Who's Abaddon?" Rose asked.

"Why the hell would you summon Abaddon?" I said, ignoring her.

"The summoner has control over him, the most powerful demon ever made. I'm weak in this form, relegated to parlor tricks." He changed his form twice for effect. "With Abaddon, I could regain my former glory, and more."

I stood and stared at him, feeling my heart thumping against my chest. I had made a promise to Abaddon.

A promise to destroy him.

The binding of the deal had been lost in my transformation. It didn't mean I had forgotten. I'm sure the demon hadn't either.

"Who is Abaddon?" Rose asked again.

"A demon. *The* demon. Lucifer modeled him after the Beast. We've crossed paths a couple of times. If anyone brought Abaddon back to this world, they would instantly become the greatest threat to everything here, Divine or not." I shifted my eyes back to Gervais. "Why would you give that up so easily?"

"You think it was an easy choice to make? I can't rise to glory if I'm dead, if we're all dead. I told you, I'll find another way. As long as you can keep the others from completing the summoning."

"You need to tell me who they are."

He smiled. "I know."

Right. He would tell me when we defeated the Fists. If we

defeated the Fists. The situation had circled back around. At least now I knew what he was after. At least now I knew how important the names he was withholding might actually be.

Assuming he wasn't full of shit.

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We drove up the coast. It was four hundred miles from Los Angeles to San Francisco, and we made good time. Rose had a heavy foot and an aggressive style, honking, cursing, and flashing her lights at anyone who dared cross her path in the wrong way.

Her road rage kept the ride from being too quiet or tense.

I spent the journey halfway inside my head, trying to work through the overload of information I'd been given in the last twenty-four hours. Abaddon worried me, but it was a problem I could deal with later. Gervais was two years into the summoning and hadn't been too close, so I had to believe I would get at least a couple of weeks to finish working through this mess before I had to start cleaning up the next one.

That left me with Matthias Zheng.

I didn't know what to make of him. Smart, yes. A good guy? He must have believed it, to be helping the angels. Was he the kind of guy you could talk to? To persuade? I hoped so.

The only other option was to kill him.

I wondered if that was even a good idea. The now destroyed

Canaan Blades had been forged in Heaven. What was to say Matthias' soul wouldn't just rise up, or that he wouldn't decide to join the seraphim as their new high-tech armorer? He could keep making the Fists, could keep improving the tech. Right now, I could fight them - well, one at a time, anyway. What if he had an eternity to perfect the work?

I was still stuck on that line of thought as we drove past the airport and made our way into the city of San Francisco itself. It was funny, because for all the Divine power I had witnessed, for the little bit of energy I had saved for myself - we still needed to rely on GPS to get us close to the safe house address.

We stopped the car almost a mile away. According to the nav, the safe house was near Islais Creek, and the satellite view we pulled up showed it to be a pretty ragged industrial area. Lots of concrete and big, square buildings. Lots of pickups and older model cars. Even here, the homes and apartments were proving their proximity, most of them small and suggesting lower income inhabitants. If the SUV had been mine, I might have even worried about it.

I was tempted to ask Rose and Gervais to stay behind, and not for any other reason than because I didn't trust the demon, and thought it would be safer for Rose. I wanted to protect her, when I knew that I couldn't. If mankind was going to learn to fend for itself, it started with her.

So we left the Escalade parked in front of a small green house with a busted fence, and walked down cracked sidewalks towards the creek. I kind of wished we had a pickup to ride in on, because walking was almost as conspicuous as the SUV. At least losing the roof had made it easier to watch the skies.

We walked in silence, with Rose at my side and Gervais trailing behind, his eyes sweeping back and forth, scanning rooftops, the sky, and our backs as we moved. If we were fortunate, the angels didn't know that we knew where they had stashed Matthias. The wrinkle was that Valerix had lost her informant over a week ago. Was the engineer still holed up inside? There was only going to be one way to find out.

The address turned out to be a large, aluminum sided building in the middle of the industrial area. It was nothing special compared to its surrounds, ringed by a chain link fence with a semi trailer resting on the west side. The place had no windows, and the

only other visible doors were two roll-ups near the trailer. I expected maybe there would be some security cameras mounted to the exterior, or near the corners of the fencing. There was none of that either.

The entire place was deserted. The businesses around the building were closed - it looked like for good. We hadn't Seen any Divine on our way in, and there was nothing about any of it that suggested anyone was home.

Which made it the perfect place to hide.

The lack of people was the biggest clue. The Divine had a special power over the mortal, their very presence causing a subliminal, subconscious response that tended to cause humans to shy away from areas where they gathered, especially in areas of recent or upcoming conflict. It was almost like an unknown, unrecognizable sixth sense.

Was that why the surrounding businesses were shuttered? Or was there a simpler explanation? Heaven and Hell both had their share of supporters with deep pockets. Buying out the area around the building wouldn't have been out of the question.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Rose said.

We were up the street from the building, crouched at the corner of one of the other buildings, staying in the shadows.

"A specific feeling, or just general unease?" I asked. The Awake could See the Divine. They also had a better handle on that innate sixth sense. What she was feeling might have been caused by a buildup of Divine power.

"I don't know. A little bit of both."

Gervais sighed from behind her. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"I'm nervous. I also feel like something is… I don't know… off."

"He's probably still inside," I said.

Gervais nodded. "I agree. Or seraphim at the least. I didn't sense any demons while we were coming in, but that doesn't mean they aren't out here, watching from a distance." He pointed back the way we'd come. "High powered binoculars or a scope could keep an eye on this place from further back."

"What should we do?" Rose asked.

"We need to go for it," I said. "If there are demons out here they aren't working for Valerix, or they would have been reporting in. We need to get in and grab Matthias before they can stop us or take

him themselves."

"They might not even know what they're watching," Gervais said. "If they came upon Valerix's minions and decided there could be something valuable inside, they may have killed them to claim the prize. Of course they'll scout it first, if they know the seraphim are involved."

"Seriously?" Rose said. "How do you demons ever threaten the balance when you can't even cooperate among yourselves?"

Gervais smiled at her, a condescending smile. "Landon can tell you how close I came."

"The squabbling is the only reason the angels are able to keep the balance, considering they are far fewer in number," I said, not giving the archfiend credit for anything.

Gervais spat on the ground. "Pah. The other archfiends are pathetic and small-minded. That is why they don't succeed."

I returned my attention to the building. We needed to be fast, to break our way in before who or whatever was inside had a chance to react. If there were demons watching the building, forcing them to enter would give us a better chance to pick them off before they could amass.

The question was: how were we going to get there fast enough? Gervais had been plenty quick back at the Underground, and I could force more power into my muscles to speed myself up. What about Rose? It wasn't enough for me to handle everything.

I turned back towards her to discuss it.

She was gone.

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“Where did she go?” I asked.

Gervais shrugged. “Who?”

He just *had* to be an asshole. “You know who.”

“Your bitch went that way,” he said, pointing across the street. I saw her vanish behind a tall, square cement building.

I wondered what she was doing. A few seconds later, I heard a rumble, the release of heavy brakes, and the roar of an engine.

“Not exactly subtle,” Gervais said.

Not exactly. A cement truck appeared from behind the building, making a tight right turn in front of us and chugging down the street. It bounced and rolled as Rose changed gears, pegging the accelerator and getting it moving as fast as it could.

“Not the worst idea either.” It was brute force instead of stealth. Maybe it would attract the occupant’s attention. Maybe they would see her coming. They wouldn’t be able to stop a cement truck.

I pushed the power into my limbs and started running, getting up to the back of the truck and hopping on. Gervais did the same, moving with a speed and agility that no mortal could match. I

didn't feel anything when the machine slammed into the fence, ripping it down without slowing. I leaned out from the edge, watching the building approach at breakneck speed. I ducked back behind it as it slammed into the wall, and kept going.

There was a clatter and ringing as the truck pierced the building, passing through anything that was in its way. Aluminum siding fell around me, and fibers coated me in a layer of dust. Then there was a jolt, a whine and crushing of metal, and we came to an abrupt halt that sent waves of pain up my neck. I pushed myself to heal and jumped off the back, rushing to the driver's side.

"Rose?"

The door flew open and she hopped out, her knife in hand. "He's here. Come on." She ran ahead of me, vaulting the mangled mess of steel she had crashed the truck into. I turned and leaped, following her over it.

Whatever the building had once been, it had been gutted and converted to something somewhere between a lab and a penthouse. The space was huge and open, a long corridor lit by sharp LEDs that hung from plain wires looped around the ceiling cross-beams. At the near end was the lab, a workstation with massive monitors hanging in front of it, a large, flat table with scrolls laid out and weighted so they wouldn't roll up again, and a bunch of equipment and machinery that I didn't recognize, and would have no idea what to do with.

The far end was a living space. A bed, a couch, a large-screen television. A kitchen, and an enclosed area that must have been the bathroom. There was a man there, standing in front of the couch looking at us, the video game controller still in his hands. I could hear the music of whatever he was playing blasting through the speakers.

There were no angels here. There was no one here, except for him. Matthias Zheng. I recognized him from the profile.

Was it really going to be this easy?

The controller fell from his hand. He watched us coming, showing no signs of distress or panic, no indication that he was worried about us at all. He reached down onto the couch, removing an object that looked like a baseball.

We were still twenty feet away. I had sprinted ahead of Rose, and was closing on him in a hurry. I could see Gervais gaining out of the corner of my eye. He had his own weapon in hand, ready to

use it on the man. I really wanted to reach Matthias first, to make sure we captured him, and got to talk to him.

I gathered the energy and pushed, using it to propel me off the ground towards him in a dive that probably made it look like I was flying. The baseball fell from his hand and rolled onto the floor.

I reached out, lunging with my arms, my hands grabbing his shoulders, my momentum pulling us both to the ground. We rolled a couple of times and he fell away from me, coming to a stop on the carpet a few feet away. I ignored the pain and shoved myself to my feet, scrambling to reach him before Gervais could, watching helplessly as the demon leaped onto him, knife raised.

"Gervais, no," I shouted. I gathered the energy and threw it at him, knocking him away.

Too late.

The knife rested in the engineer's chest.

Only he didn't scream.

He didn't make any sound at all.

He hadn't made a sound when I tackled him either.

The three of us converged on him almost at the same time. There was no blood pooling up from the entry point. Instead, there was a clear, slick fluid.

"Synthetic oil," Rose said. "He's a fake."

A fake? They had known we were coming long enough to arrange the doppelgänger. No. How could they? We had only known we were coming five hours ago.

"Landon," Gervais said softly. "We have company."

I turned and watched as the demons streamed in around the truck. Mostly vampires and weres, along with a contingent of armed devils, summoned from Hell by the fallen angel at their head. There had to be fifty or more. Too many to fight.

"Don't move," the fallen angel said. He was easy to identify by the demonic runes painted across the part of his arms that were visible, and the dark wings that folded out behind him. He wanted us to see them, and to know what he was.

"Who are you?" Gervais asked.

The runes on the angel's arms glowed, and Gervais fell to his knees, clutching at his throat. The other demons continued moving, filling in around us, blocking us in.

"You don't question me." His voice was calm, confident. His eyes scanned us. "What are the Nicht Creidem doing here, I

wonder? What prize have my brothers been stashing, that have attracted such acute interest?"

He thought because we had no Divine aura that we were Nicht Creidem - a cabal of mortals who had been bred and inbred to a partial immunity to Divine power, who trained from birth to fight the Divine, and who spent their resources hunting down the Divine artifacts that existed in the world, hoping they would give them an edge in seeing their ultimate goal achieved.

Destruction of all the Divine, regardless of consequence, regardless of whether or not it meant the end of man as well. They were another player, and while we had similar goals, I understood that the Divine were a necessary evil, that they were an equal part of the balance, and that without them, without that balance, mankind would simply destroy itself instead.

Not that we didn't seem to be on the brink sometimes, anyway.

"This," I said, kicking the fake Matthias Zheng. "There were other demons who were watching this place. Did you kill them?"

"I said, you don't question me." The angel's eyes burned, and he moved his hand. I heard Gervais take a heaving breath, and stared back at the fallen while he tried to choke me. I pushed my power against his, keeping my own airway clear.

I was about to take a step towards him, to challenge him, when Rose nudged me with her elbow.

"Landon, look," she said, motioning past the angel.

The object that fake Matthias had dropped was still resting on the floor. There was seraphim scripture carved into it, and it was glowing.

I was wrong. It wasn't a baseball.

"Praise be to God in the Highest," the doppelgänger said in a synthesized voice.

I clenched my stomach, taking my power and wrenching it in. The not-baseball vanished in a burst of white light, followed by the red and blue of intense heat.

I pushed the power out, a hemisphere of energy that expanded enough to cover Rose and Gervais, that caught the fallen angel in its protection as well. The blast tore through the assembled demon army, the heat destroying those that were susceptible to it, the cold blue of the Heavenly flame killing the rest.

It continued outward while I crouched and gritted my teeth, pushing my own power back against it, keeping the explosion from

reaching us. I could feel the sweat on my forehead, the strain in my muscles. Everything vanished, leaving us submerged in a sea of red and blue flame.

It was replaced a few seconds later by the force of the building collapsing around us. I closed my eyes, concentrating on keeping us safe, using every bit of my strength to do it. Metal beams and aluminum siding came to a rest against my invisible shield, covering us and leaving us in darkness. I felt Rose take my hand in hers. I heard the slap of flesh against flesh, and the fallen angel grunted.

Ten more seconds, and it was done. I made one last push, throwing the debris away and freeing us from the burial. I opened my eyes. We were under open skies, the building around us reduced to ash and twisted metal, the roof gone, the entire west side, gone.

A bomb designed to kill demons. They had known they were being watched.

They had been prepared.

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Rose put her hand under my shoulder and helped me to my feet. I stumbled a little bit, disoriented by the massive use of the power. I could feel it churning in my soul. It couldn't be diminished, only disturbed, and the disturbance left me weak.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I will be. I need food, rest."

Gervais was standing over the fallen angel, having knocked him to the ground during the explosion.

The dark seraph looked up at us, his nose bloodied. "What was that?"

"You don't ask questions," Gervais said. "You're outnumbered now." He kicked him in the gut again for good measure.

"Let him up," I said. The demon looked at me and backed off.

The fallen angel got to his feet. "What kind of artifact holds such power, to protect us from this?" He motioned at the destruction around us.

"None of your business," I said. It didn't matter who he thought we were. Not now. "Do you know why we're here?"

“Why do the Nicht Creidem turn up anywhere? To capture something of power, I’m sure.” He looked around again. “I don’t think you’re going to find it here.”

“Is that why you were here? Is that why you were watching?”

“Something valuable, yes. Valerix’s spies took a strong interest in this building. We saw the angels come and go from here. We knew they had something she wanted.”

“You don’t know what?”

“What does it matter? We were preparing to take it. Then you showed up and we were forced to act. Lucky for me that I had already created the rift to carry in the soldiers.” He shook his head, looking over at the mess again. “I wasn’t prepared for this.”

“It was a bomb,” I said. “A bomb made to kill demons.” Maybe the Nicht Creidem, too. Why else have a physical explosion to go with the holy flame? “They were waiting for you. They knew you were watching.”

“No. They couldn’t have. We never came close. I dispatched Valerix’s spy myself. No one saw.”

Someone saw. Unless this whole place had been a honeypot from the beginning. Angels had their own way of being sneaky.

“Who are you working for, if not the archfiend?” Gervais asked.

“I’m not some sniveling vampire. I don’t work for anyone. Coming across that horny bitch’s lackey, that was pure luck.”

“Bad luck,” Rose said.

The fallen angel glared at her. “You saved my life. What do you plan to do with me?”

“I didn’t save your life on purpose. That part was good luck for you. I don’t really care what you do. The treasure you wanted, the treasure we came for, isn’t here.” He didn’t need to know we were looking for a person, something I doubted he would find any value in at all.

“You’re letting him go?” Gervais asked.

“Why not?” I snapped. I was already pissed enough at him for stabbing Matthias before we knew he wasn’t the real deal, and his questioning wasn’t helping.

“Information. He’ll find someone to sell this story to. Someone who will bring it back somewhere that it may get intercepted, or traded on to the seraphim.”

“So what? This was a trick and a trap rolled into one. What does it matter if Adam finds out we were here?” The angel wouldn’t even

remember what I looked like, though I was sure he would derive the truth from whatever tale reached him.

"Fool. It isn't just Adam you need to worry about. If word starts to spread that the Nicht Creidem are searching for an artifact powerful enough to go headlong into an angel safe house for, you can be sure it will make things much more complicated."

"If you let me go, I won't say a word about this," the angel said.

Gervais stepped in and grabbed him by the throat. "You lie."

"No. Look at me. I've lost my army. I'm starting over."

"All the more reason for you to sell whatever you can." Gervais turned to me. "You know I can be useful, diuscrucis. As you said yourself, I know demons better than anyone."

"Diuscrucis? What?" The fallen angel took a step back and fell to his knees. "I can help you."

"You turned your back on your God, and you think you can be trusted?" Rose said. "I hate to say this, but I agree with Gervais."

I looked at her, surprised.

"It's not just about one demon," she said, using my own words against me.

Of course, she was right.

"Do what you need to do," I said to Gervais. "I'm going back to the car. I need to sit for a while."

I turned my back on the two demons and started walking away. I was weak and tired, and my stomach was making itself known. Rose kept her arm around me, lending me a little bit of support as I moved.

The fallen angel didn't scream or beg or cry out. I heard the soft sound of Gervais' knife sinking into his flesh and got a whiff of the frankincense that followed.

I didn't look back.

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The fire trucks screamed past even as we piled back into the Escalade, with Rose behind the wheel and Gervais in the back. I didn't say anything to the demon, not yet. I didn't say anything to Rose either. I wanted something to eat. I wanted to close my eyes. I was lightheaded, unbalanced, the power feeling like a stormy ocean in my soul.

"Rose, can you find us a hotel or a motel or something? Deflecting explosions isn't good for my health. I'll need a few hours to recharge."

She leaned over and tapped some buttons on the navigation system. "Looks like the Happy Bay Inn is the closest."

"I'm not picky."

She put the truck in gear. Five minutes later I was alone in the car with Gervais, while Rose went inside to get us a room. The place wasn't much to look at, and was probably lacking in any kind of comfort beyond four walls, a ceiling, and a bed. It was more than good enough for me.

I had one more thing to do before I could rest. It was the reason

I'd asked Rose to do the check-in.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I said, shifting in my seat so I could see Gervais. The demon was laying across the rear bench, picking his nose.

He flicked his prize away. "What do you mean?"

"With Zheng."

He shrugged. "He's dangerous. I was thinking I would end the danger."

"I wanted to talk to him."

"What for?"

"What for? For one, I'd love to see if he knows why he's immune to Divine power. For another, I'd like to try to talk him down from helping Heaven."

The demon sat up, putting his face too close to mine. He smiled. "Convince him to help you instead? All the more reason to kill him."

"I don't want to convince him to help anyone. I just want him to stop. What if he dies and continues his work? He'll be upstairs. He'll have access to anything he needs."

"He's mortal. That will happen sooner or later, regardless of your best intentions."

"If we can talk to him now, he might refuse to help out once he passes."

He laughed in my face. Right in my face. "Are you serious? He made a bomb that kills demons. No, not just demons. It obliterated that entire warehouse. It was meant to kill whoever or whatever came after him. A man like that is not one to abandon his ideals because some wanna-be godling has a chat with him." He sat back. "Better to kill him first, and then deal with the consequences."

"No. Maybe I wouldn't be able to convince him not to help the angels. We would have at least gotten him to talk. To tell us about the Fists. There's no saying Alichino is going to find anything helpful in that head."

"Are you suggesting torture? Hmm… you do still surprise me sometimes."

I took a deep breath. "If it came down to it, yeah, I guess I am suggesting torture. This has already gone beyond just the Fists. I've never seen anything like that bomb before. Heavenly flame? That's a new one to me. Give Zheng another month, and he'll have the Divine nuke that the Nicht Creidem have always wanted."

“Except it will only vaporize demons,” Gervais said. “Heavenly flame… I’ve heard of the seraphim’s cold fire, though I believed only the archangels could wield it.” He rubbed his chin with his hand, silent for a moment. “It is troubling.”

“Yeah. Anyway, the angels have to be building these things somewhere, right? Somewhere here, in this realm. Zheng can tell us where. If we can shut it down then it doesn’t matter if he tells them how to make things, because they’ll still never get made.”

“An interesting theory. I can admit that I may have been a bit premature in my decision to end his life. I suppose it’s fortunate for both of us that we attacked a replica.”

“We got lucky in that, at least. Let’s get one thing clear here, Gervais. This is my work, my team, my rules. I lead, you follow. It isn’t a democracy.”

“Are you certain? I seem to recall you being outvoted on the matter of the fallen angel not ten minutes ago.”

“No. You made a suggestion, and I saw the value in your logic.” I was trying not to let him get under my skin. I was failing.

“Whatever you want to call it to feel like you’re in control. I don’t see you having a tantrum at your little plaything for her cowgirl antics.”

“How I handle Rose isn’t your concern.”

“Of course.” He leaned over and pushed open his door. “I’m going to go for a walk. Don’t worry, I’ll stay disguised.” He morphed into Anita, just to piss me off even more. “I can imagine how you’d like to handle Rose.” He fondled his breasts suggestively, blew me a kiss, and then hopped out and started walking away, morphing into Peter as he did.

I watched him go for a couple of seconds, and then turned my attention back to the hotel. Rose pushed her way out of the lobby and came over to the car, holding a set of keys in her hand.

“Where’s Gervais?” she asked, sliding into the driver’s seat.

“He went for a walk.”

“To walk, or to eat?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know.”

She started the truck and drove us to a spot a little further down. “That’s our room there,” she said, pointing to the door in front of us. “Are you okay?”

“I will be. I don’t usually get like this unless I time walk. That bomb packed a punch.”

“Time walk? Is that what it sounds like?”

“Maybe. It’s like teleportation.”

“Another cool trick. I might be willing to die for that one.”

I smiled at the joke, opened the door and slid out of the Escalade. “Can you grab Valerix’s laptop?”

“Okay. Thanks for saving my life, by the way.”

“You’re welcome.”

She got the computer, and we went into the hotel room. It was predictably shabby, with dirty walls, a rust colored carpet, and a thin, queen-sized mattress on a squeaky frame. The bathroom was done up in polka-dot wallpaper and matching shower curtain, a pattern that made my head hurt even more.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. “Rose, can we talk for a minute?”

She put the computer down on the dresser, next to the old tube television. “This is about the dump truck, isn’t it?”

“Yes and no. It’s more about the fact that you didn’t wait for us to make a plan, or even give me a warning.”

She took a deep breath, walking over and dropping down onto the bed next to me, putting her face close to mine. It was much more enjoyable than having Gervais six inches away.

“I understand if you’re upset. The thing is - I want to help you. I really, really do. It’s just… I don’t know if you’ve been paying attention the last twenty four hours, but I’m outmatched. Seriously outmatched. Your power is amazing, and even Gervais is stronger and faster than I can ever be. That fallen angel? The Fists? Hell, even the bomb. Without you, I would be dead three or four times over. In less than twenty four hours.”

I was surprised, because she hadn’t seemed like the type to have doubts. “You handled yourself with Valerix’s were.”

“I did. That was *one* were. How often am I going to get odds like that? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to complain, and I don’t regret meeting you.” She paused, taking my hand in hers. “I can’t rely on being stronger, or faster, or tougher than what I’m fighting. The vast majority of the time, I doubt I will be. That means I need to rely on my human strengths, on being emotional and unpredictable.”

I was the one who had said it. At least she was listening. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I want to believe that. If it hadn’t been for the bomb, we would

still be in a world of trouble. I gave the demons an easy way in."

I couldn't argue the truth of it. "You've been doing this for one day. You'll learn. I wanted to talk to you about it, because I want to help reign in some of your impulsiveness before you get yourself killed."

She smiled. "I feel like I could get killed just sitting next to you."

"I can't make any guarantees."

"I know. Isn't that the point? I'm part of this now. It's scary as hell, and also one of the most exciting, liberating things I've ever done. I'm human. I know I'm going to make mistakes. I know I can't hang with you demi-gods, but I'm trying to prove that I'm worth having around."

"You don't have to do anything to prove you-"

She kissed me.

She didn't just kiss me. She put her arm across my chest, pushed me back down on the bed, leaned over me, and pressed her lips to mine. It was aggressive and impulsive, emotional and unpredictable.

I didn't kiss her back. It wasn't that I didn't think she was attractive, or that there wasn't a part of me that was tempted. I was still a virgin. I was sure Rose wasn't. Maybe it was old-fashioned. Maybe it was stupid. I didn't want my first time to go down like this, and I didn't want to complicate our relationship before we even had a chance to be friends. Right now, I needed an ally a lot more than I needed sex.

She pulled away.

"That's a new one," she said, looking down at me in disbelief. I could imagine she wasn't accustomed to rejection.

"Rose…" I took a deep breath and huffed it out. I could feel my heart pounding, my body reacting even if my mind was unwilling. "You don't have to try so hard. You don't have to prove anything to me, or do… this, for me to feel like you're worth having around."

Her eyes narrowed and rolled, and she pushed herself away from me, pissed. "Is that what you think this is? I don't know what kind of girls you've had around before, but I have a little more self-worth then to just throw myself at you because I feel like it's the only thing I can help you with. Maybe I just thought, you know, you're here, I'm here, maybe it would help us both unwind a little bit, have a little fun and forget about this Divine stuff for a while. It's fine if you don't want to. It's fine for you to say no thanks. You

don’t have to be an asshole about it.”

She hopped off the bed, leaving me laying there and feeling like an idiot. All the power in the universe hadn’t made me any better at this sort of thing.

“Rose, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you.“

She smiled, the anger fading from her face. “Just forget it. You needed rest and food, right? I’ll go and get you some ice cream. Do you have a preference?”

“Cookie dough,” I said, returning her smile.

“Good choice.” She walked over to the door. “I’ll try to be a little less impulsive. I’m not making any promises.”

She slipped away, leaving me tongue tied and tired.

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I slept for three hours, feeling a lot better when I woke up. Gervais was still out, but Rose was there, sitting on the bed next to me, Valerix's laptop open.

"Shit. The ice cream," I said, sitting up.

Rose turned her head and laughed. "Don't worry about it. There's a freezer behind that door." She pointed at the dresser.

"Thanks for picking it up," I said, sliding off the bed and going over to get it.

"How come you don't just use your special sauce to grab it?" she asked.

"I wouldn't feel very human if I used the power to let myself be lazy."

"Are you sure you wouldn't feel more human?"

I opened the freezer and grabbed the ice cream. There were two spoons laying on top of the lid.

"I got some teriyaki before, but I left room for dessert."

I brought it back over to the bed and plopped down next to her. "About before-" I started to say.

“Forget it, Landon. No harm done on my end. I shouldn’t have been so horny. The adrenaline, you saving my life. It hit me right here.” She smiled at me, motioning between her legs. “It was my fault for pushing you, especially when I knew you were tired.”

“I don’t want things to get complex,” I said.

“If that’s what it is to you, I understand, and I respect that. To me, it’s just good fun. No emotional attachment needed, and no expectations after.”

I just wasn’t built that way. I handed her a spoon and popped the lid. We both dug in.

“So, what have you found?” I asked, after savoring a nice chunk of dough.

She turned the screen so I could see it better. “The profile is incomplete. To be honest, it’s pretty lousy. Yeah, they got the history from the time our guy was adopted, but I mean, they totally missed his special assignment to Los Alamos.”

“The National Lab? I didn’t know they did robotics?”

“They don’t. Not publicly, anyway.” She hit a few keys. “Your friend Obi helped me do some digging while you were sleeping.”

“Obi?” I was confused. “You talked to him?”

“Oh yeah, I borrowed your phone.” I noticed it on the bed between us. “Oblitrix, Obi… I made the connection. I didn’t realize it was short for Obi-wan though.”

“Okay. So what did you and Obi find?”

“Zheng was working for a startup in New Mexico, RoGen. It’s a mashup of robotics and genetics. Basically, they were working on technology to make robots that had biological components. Self-healing skin, living muscle, that kind of thing. Like a modern day Frankenstein.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Cost. Growing parts is a lot cheaper than importing rare earth minerals from China.”

“Interesting.”

“Yeah. Anyway, Matthias spent six months over at Los Alamos. We couldn’t figure out what he was working on, but I bet its related to his work for RoGen.”

“And the Fists of God?”

“Most likely.”

“How do you know he was spending time there?”

“Obi was the one who figured that part out. He noticed that

RoGen wasn't too far from the lab, so he decided to check their gate records. He matched up the plate on Zheng's car with daily entrance and exits, six days a week for six months."

Good old Obi. I owed him a quad latte with extra caramel the next time I saw him. "When did he start carousing with angels?"

"I don't know. What I do know is that he quit RoGen a week after he stopped checking in at Los Alamos."

I grabbed another spoonful of ice cream and shoved it into my mouth. Rose did the same, and we were silent while we ate.

"We need to find Matthias Zheng," I said. "The safe house was a trap, and we have no other leads. My gut says we should make the trip to New Mexico and try to find out what exactly he was working on. If it has anything at all to do with the Fists, we might be able to get some kind of information that can help us find him, and fight them."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "It sounds like a reasonable plan to me."

"You did great work. You and Obi, both. Human ingenuity."

She blushed. "It was more Obi than me. That guy is too smart for words. Hey, I wonder how Dante is doing with that head you gave him?"

I had almost forgotten. I picked up the phone from the bed and searched the contact list. Somehow, between the time Dante had visited and now, he had added Alichino's phone number. I put it on speaker and made the call.

"Yeah, what do you want?" The harlequin demon's voice was a thin rasp on the other end of the line. I could picture him in my mind, his spindly black and white body, his toothy snout, the lycra bicycle shorts he favored to keep himself modest.

"What's so funny?" Rose whispered.

"I'll tell you later. Alichino, it's me, Landon."

"Oh, it's you, Landon. Great. Just the guy I wanted to hear from. I bet you're calling about the head, right? Not to say 'hey', not to see how I'm doing. We haven't talked in two years, and now you only call because you need something."

"You've been in Purgatory. I can't reach you there."

"Yeah, like that's an excuse. Whatever, meat sack."

Rose started laughing.

"Who's that?" the demon asked. "She sounds sexy."

"My name is Rose. I'm helping Landon."

“You a succubus?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m human.”

“Humph. Well, nobody’s perfect.”

“Alichino, what can you tell me about the head?” I asked.

There were a few beats of silence. We heard clattering through the phone, like the demon had spilled a bucket of screws on the floor. It was followed by a loud bang.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “I was looking for my webcam. You got a computer with a camera there?”

“Yes,” Rose said.

“Good. My Skype name is Alliequin. A-L-L-I-E-Q-U-I-N. I’ll be waiting.”

He hung up.

“Who is he?” Rose asked while she hit the net and downloaded the software.

“A demon. He got kicked out of Hell for letting some guy named Bonturo trick him. He’s been trying to get back in ever since. I promised to help him get there at one point, and since discovered that once Lucifer kicks you out, the only way to go back is with his permission. He’s kind of pissed about it, which is why he’s a little abrasive.”

“I don’t think he’s abrasive. I think he’s cute.”

She finished installing Skype, and logged in with her ‘DemonHuntress023’ name. She added ‘Alliequin’ and made the connection. The demon’s face popped up on the screen, just like I had imagined it.

“You are sexy,” he said on seeing Rose. He glanced over at me. “Here, let me show you.”

He shifted the camera so that it was pointing at a desk cluttered with wires and books, and a computer monitor sitting in the corner. The head sat in the center, with what looked like jumper cables running from the ends of a pair of exposed wires to somewhere off-camera.

“Okay, so this thing, it is absolutely swimming in scripture. I mean, it makes the Sistine Chapel look like it was painted by a two year old. And this is just the head. You get me?”

“I get you.”

“Yeah, two things about that. One, there’s no hand in the world

that can make these kinds of marks at this size with any kind of consistency, except maybe the hand of God Himself, and I doubt he's finger painting on armor these days. Two, the scripture isn't just on the outside. It's on the inside, too. On the circuits."

"Did you say on the circuits?" Rose asked.

"Yeah. The lettering is almost microscopic. It's printed right onto the circuit. That means whatever is making it, it has to be industrial."

"So you think there's a machine that's pressing it?" I said.

"A few different kinds of machines. One for the circuits, one for the metal. I saved the best for last though. The wiring is made from living tissue."

It wasn't that surprising, considering what Rose had just told me. "We figured that part out already. Have you been able to work out the meaning of the scripture?"

"You see those books? I got some of it. This thing is protected against pretty much any kind of demonic attack you can imagine. Teeth, claws, blades, even hellfire. It's also reinforced against ballistics. Bullets, arrows, regular swords, and all that. That's the outer scripture. I'm still working on the inside. It's slow going, because I have to look at all of it under a microscope. "

"You did a lot of work in only a little time," I said. "Any weaknesses?"

The demon snickered. "Other than cutting off the head? You could probably drop a rock on it or something to get it to stop moving."

"Already did that. Do you have any idea what's powering it?" Something that big and heavy had to have a pretty massive battery. It was likely in the torso, but maybe the wiring would give some indication.

"No clue. Like I said, the wires are all organic, so whatever it is, I think it's pretty unique."

"Okay. Last question. Does it have a brain?"

"If you consider a couple of memory chips to be like a brain, then sure."

"So, no. Rose, do you have any other questions?"

"Yes, I'll go out with you," Alichino said. His snout split in a sharp grin and his tongue flicked out between his teeth.

She shook her head. "No. You've been very helpful, Alichino. Maybe we can go out when this is over."

He nodded enthusiastically. “I hope you aren’t lying to me, too.”

His eyes shifted to me, pushing the guilt.

Then he disconnected.

“What do you think?” Rose asked.

“I think we need to stick to the plan. Head to New Mexico and see what we can find out. It’s obvious they’ve built some kind of machinery to create the Fists. Maybe it’s hiding in Los Alamos? I-“

My stomach clenched and released, and I lost my breath. I closed my eyes for a second and put my head in my hands.

“Landon, are you okay?”

I opened my eyes and straightened up. The sharp change in the balance had caught me by surprise.

“We need to pick up the pace. It’s started.”

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We were on a plane to New Mexico a few hours later. Gervais had reappeared from his extended ‘walk’ not long after we disconnected from Alichino, and I filled him in on what we were planning to do without mentioning what the demon had told us. Discounting his usual insults and jibes, he was more than willing to follow my lead, and seemed almost relieved that I had some kind of plan.

It was mid-morning by the time we touched down, the flight going a little smoother than the first now that everyone had gotten to know each other a little better. That wasn’t to say Rose was growing any warmer towards her sister’s killer, but she was getting more accustomed to his presence, and had managed to fully accept him as a necessary evil.

I didn’t get any more shocks in the interim, the balance staying steady beyond the initial hit. Whatever had happened, whoever the angels had sent the Fists after, the needle moved. Not near enough to be a problem. Just enough that I would notice.

Was Adam sending me a message?

Los Alamos was a stark departure from the crowds and hustle of

New York. Sparse and spread out, with lots of low lying brush and brown grass, and surrounded by brown hills. It had it's own specific beauty to it. A beauty that I didn't think I was able to appreciate. After making the drive from the airport to the town outside of the National Laboratory, I missed the concrete and glass, the crowds and the congestion. At least it would be easy to spot Divine.

"It sure is beautiful out here," Rose said. We had rented a mid-sized Hyundai or something at the airport, and she was driving.

"It reminds me of Hell," Gervais said.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I replied.

"Oh, come on. This is peaceful. Elemental. Don't you ever get tired of the noise? The people?"

"If I did, I could think of a lot nicer places to escape than a desert," I said.

"You should visit France sometime, Rosie. Picnic along the Rhine, a nice bottle of merlot or maybe a sauvignon. Just you and your thoughts."

"The idea of you alone with your thoughts is terrifying," I said, looking back at the demon.

"That isn't the point I was trying to make. There is nothing beautiful about this barren landscape."

Rose turned the wheel, bringing us off 502 and into the heart of the so-called city.

"So, now what?" she asked. "We're here."

"Do we have an address for RoGen?" I said.

"It should be in an office building a mile or so down Central."

"Let's head over there first."

She kept us on the small avenue, driving us past a shopping center, some houses, a few apartment buildings, and some other office buildings. The whole thing seemed kind of random, like the developers here just put stuff wherever, no real zoning needed.

A few minutes later, we pulled into the small lot of a three story office building. It was newer construction, with reflective, tinted windows and white concrete. There were about a dozen cars parked outside, suggesting the building wasn't heavily occupied.

"Rose, would you mind waiting in the car?" I said once she pulled into a spot. "It's going to look strange for three of us to go up, and we need someone on the outside keeping lookout."

I was hoping she wouldn't think I was punishing her because of the incident in San Francisco. If she did, she didn't show it.

“No problem. What should I do if any Divine show up? How am I going to warn you?”

“Blast the horn. I’ll hear it.”

She nodded, reached down, and pulled the blessed and cursed knives from her calves, putting them on her lap. “Do you think this is a trap, too?”

“I can’t rule it out. I would have preferred to go right to the Lab, but we need to come up with a way in first. I don’t want a repeat of the CMO’s office if we can help it.”

“Are you coming?” Gervais asked. He was already out of the car, his form morphed into an older man in a business suit. A fresh kill?

I got out, adjusting my own clothing to match the demon’s.

“So, what are we pretending to be?” he asked.

“Feds,” I replied. “Working missing persons.”

“Fun.”

We made our way into the building. The lobby was clean and bright, filled with the scent of the fresh flowers that lined the reception desk. There was no indication that anyone ever worked behind it.

“Elevator’s over there,” I said. There was an office directory between the two sets of doors. It only had eight names on it. RoGen was listed by itself on the third floor.

We got in and rode up in silence.

The elevator stopped. The doors opened. I had no expectations.

I was still taken by surprise.

There was nothing. No desks, no cubes, and no people. There wasn’t even a sign hanging anywhere with the company name on it. Just a large, blank room, with a soft blue carpet and windows ringing the perimeter.

“Another trick?” Gervais said. “I didn’t think the flying monkeys had it in them.”

I looked around the room.

“No, I don’t think it was a trick.” The light was streaming in through the windows, showing that the carpeting was still slightly compressed in some places. “Something heavy was sitting in that corner. There was a desk over there. Someone used to be in this office, and they only left recently.”

“Bah. It doesn’t matter, diuscrucis. Everything is gone. We should be, too. Focus on what we can find, not what is missing. If RoGen was here, they dismantled it.”

It couldn't be a coincidence that the company had vanished. Was the whole thing a front to the work Matthias Zheng had been doing? Either way, Gervais was right. There was no point for us to delay here, especially since checking the RoGen office had been a target of opportunity, not the main reason we'd made the trip. Part of me was hoping the angels were somehow watching us in secret, and that they knew we had stopped by. Maybe they would think we'd reached the end of the trail and smashed hard into their wall.

Maybe this time, we could catch them by surprise.

"We need to find a way into the Lab that won't attract too much attention," I said.

Gervais morphed back into his true form. "Leave that to me."

The maliciousness of his smile gave me chills.

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Of course, you could only get so close to the Lab without proper credentials. The entire site had a secure perimeter to prevent against potential terrorist threats, and was managed through three guarded vehicle entrances. That meant that in order to get onto the site, we would need a badge. To locate and gain access to whatever facility Zheng had been stationed in would take a bit more than that.

It was the reason I was sitting in the Fabulous 50s Diner with Rose.

It was the reason we had spent the last three hours waiting there.

It was the reason Gervais wasn't with us.

I didn't tell Rose what the demon was up to. I didn't need to. It was obvious that there was only one way we were going to get into the Lab, and it wasn't a pretty one. She was handling it. Not well. Well enough. I'd brought him along because I thought he would be useful. This was his big chance.

"He left two hours ago," Rose said. "What the hell is taking him

so long?"

She'd been edgy since he had excused himself from our table and made his move, leaving the diner and returning a few seconds later, morphed into a really, really handsome muscle type. We'd watched him approach a very plain looking woman in a linen suit who was wearing a LANL badge. We had overheard her talking to the waitress about how she had to work overtime today, and had just taken a break for some of their delicious pie.

His charm and pheromones had gone to work, and they had left together not long after. The demon had winked at Rose on the way by, causing her to bring her napkin up to her face and start choking, trying to hold down the vomit. I was sure he had gotten a great kick out of that.

"Knowing him, he's trying to make you squirm," I said. Her foot was tapping a fast rhythm on the floor, and while I'd ordered and eaten four pieces of cherry pie in the last two hours, her first was still untouched. "It's working."

She tried to calm her foot. It was still for about five seconds, and then started smacking against the table again, shaking up the silverware.

"Another?" our waitress, Cathy, said, stopping by to check on us for the four hundredth time. She was a grandma type, plump and grey and full of spunk. She picked up my empty plate.

"Why not?" I said. "Maybe a different flavor this time. Do you have pecan?"

"Sure do, sweetie." She glanced over at Rose's pie. "You might as well eat hers, too. Can I get you something else, dear?"

Rose looked up at her and shook her head. "No. Thanks. I'm fine."

Cathy's eyes caught mine for just a second, and she turned away. "One piece of pecan pie, and I'll grab you a warm up on your coffee." She headed off.

The door to the diner opened, and the woman in the linen suit walked in.

"He's here," I said.

Rose closed her eyes and inhaled, clenching her lips. Trying not to get sick again.

Gervais sat down next to me. Across from Rose.

"How do I look?" he asked. He stared at her and smiled, then morphed back to himself.

“Enough,” I said. I shifted and found Cathy. “Excuse me. I’m sorry, can you cancel the pie? Just the check, please.”

She smiled and nodded, and a minute later we had the check.

“How do you pay for anything?” Gervais asked me. “You don’t have any rich sympathizers to support you.”

I pulled the same bit of plastic that had been Obi’s badge and put it with the bill, changing it as my hand went from my pocket to the table. I had spent some time in prison once for identity theft. After Dante had brought me back, I had sworn I wouldn’t get back into that business.

It was one promise I hadn’t been able to keep. My expenses were light, and I tried to do it as little as possible, but sometimes I needed some quick liquidity. I figured it was a fair price for humanity to pay. In any case, Elyse payed the rent on the apartment, using the millions she had inherited after she killed her father. Money the rest of her Nicht Creidem family was still trying to get back from their former leader’s deserter of a daughter.

“You aren’t the only one with tricks,” I said, handing everything over to Cathy. “Do you have what we need?”

“I have what I need. Ah, yes. I also have the badge, and the brain. Her name is Sarah, if you can believe that. Sarah Mitchell. She’s in procurement.”

“Procurement?” Rose asked.

“She places the materials orders for the scientists.”

Cathy came back with the card. I signed us out, leaving her a nice tip. “Any materials we would be especially interested in?”

He tapped his skull. “Not in here, but I can get us into her computer. She has decent access to the rest of the network. I trust our Rose can do the work from there?”

“What’s the matter, are computers too advanced for you?” Rose asked.

“No. I just like to have the underlings handle the menial tasks.”

“Can we just go?” I said.

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The badge got us past the armed guards and through the vehicle access point, though there was a minute of tension while Sarah/Gervais explained why he had two guests with him. It was the moment at which his unique abilities proved themselves, because without his victim's memories and intimate knowledge of process and procedure at the Lab, we would have never gotten in.

"Did you doubt me?" he said. "I never doubted myself."

We were riding in Sarah's car, a late model Ford with an 'I love science' bumper sticker on the back fender. I had changed into a standard black suit for the occasion and we had picked up similar business formal attire for Rose before we drove over. She looked pretty good dressed down. She looked even better in the white blouse and skirt, with her hair pinned up and wearing a pair of low magnification reading glasses.

"I'm sure you must have doubted yourself when Sarah killed you," I said.

"Not really."

He pulled into a large parking lot and stopped near the center,

in a numbered space that matched the sticker on Sarah Mitchell's car. We got out and followed him to what I assumed was an administration building - a very normal looking concrete and glass structure. He swiped the badge at the door and pulled it open.

"Ladies first," he said, waving Rose through. She glared at him as she passed.

We took the elevator up to the third floor. The place was deserted save for a janitor who was vacuuming the carpets in the hall. Gervais gave her a warm hello and led us down a corridor to an office near the middle of the space. It was small and windowless, with a simple desk and workstation, a file cabinet, and a few photos hanging on the walls. One was of Sarah, with a man I could only assume was her husband and their two children. It was a hard one to look at, but I forced myself to do it.

There were always victims. There were always casualties. The day I felt nothing about them was the day I became the Beast.

Rose must have noticed, because she took my hand and squeezed it. I knew it wasn't easy for her either, so I returned the favor.

"Aww, how cute," Gervais said. "Rose, if you would." He motioned to the desk chair. She went over and sat behind the workstation.

"Username and password?" she said, turning on the monitor.

"Sarah period mitchell, all lowercase. 'Love my kids', lowercase, all one word." The demon stood behind her, looking over her shoulder. I stayed on the other side of the desk, giving her space to work.

"It didn't work," Rose said.

Gervais smiled. "No? Try, 'I'm dead because of you'. Again, lowercase, all one word."

We both shot him a dirty look.

"What's the damn password, you asshole?" Rose snapped.

"M-X-Y-Z-T-P-L-K-1-9-4-4. All lowercase."

She typed it in. "Now what?"

"Go down to the menu and click on 'eProcure'," the demon said. "Do a search for Zheng."

"Nothing," she replied a few seconds later.

"Hmm. Sarah didn't know what department Zheng was working in."

Rose typed something in. "Here's a list of orders for robotics,"

she said. Gervais leaned in, putting his face close to hers. She tried to angle herself further away from it.

"Standard parts, I think. Try searching on orders from RoGen."

"Nothing."

Gervais growled impatiently. "This might take all night."

"We don't have all night," I said. "Is there a way to get a list of departments?"

Rose looked at Gervais, who walked her through the steps.

"Anything promising?" I asked.

"Everything has a department number and a title," Rose said. "Mechanical engineering, biology, those are fine. This one," she pointed at the screen. "Classified. This one, too. There are three listed that way."

She clicked a few times, scanned the screen, clicked a few more times.

"Do you know the password to get into the screens for these departments?" she asked Gervais.

He shook his head. "No. She didn't have access. Find another way."

"Just like that? Just find another way?" she snapped. "No password, no entry. We can try to brute force it, but that *will* take all night."

I turned to Gervais. "You don't have anything else that can help?"

He tapped his index finger on his chin and closed his eyes. Then he smiled again. "Personnel records. Maybe we can find out who has the highest security clearance."

"Great. Then what?"

"Then I don't know. You have power. Can't you use it to get a password from their computer?"

"Just like that?" I asked. "I know it looks like magic, but it has limitations."

Rose twisted so I could see her past the monitor. "Wait. You can affect things on an atomic level, right? Do you think you'd be able to tell which keys had been hit the most frequently on a keyboard?"

I thought about it. "I might. How will that help?"

"It might not. These workstations are set to lock down after sixty seconds of inactivity. That means any time the person went to a meeting, got up to use the bathroom, got distracted by a phone call - they'd need to put their password in again."

“So the most worn keys are probably used in the password?”

“Yeah. It will still take a little time to get in because we have to try the combinations, but not as much as using the whole range of alphanumerics.”

“Not as dumb as you look,” Gervais said. “It may be the best approach.”

“Okay. Check the personnel records.”

She leaned back and starting typing and scrolling again.

“I got an org chart. Top floor, corner office. Nathan Rogers. Director of Special Operations.”

“That sounds promising,” I said. “What’s his birthday?”

“June sixteenth, 1969.”

We abandoned Sarah Mitchell’s office, heading back down the hall to the elevator. Gervais swiped the badge, and we moved up to the tenth floor.

It was indistinguishable from the third floor, at least from the hallway. The same neutral carpeting, the same off-white walls. We walked all the way down to Nathan Roger’s office. The door was locked. Opening it was trivial.

“It’s good to be the king,” Gervais said, leading us in.

The office was massive, surrounded by full length windows that provided a great view out to the rest of the complex. A leather couch sat close to the door, while a private conference table and whiteboard rested on a slightly raised floor near the window, opposite a dark wood desk. Like Sarah, Nathan kept photos of his family on prominent display. A large one of his wife on one side of the desk, and another of his labrador on the other side.

I sat down behind the workstation, closing my eyes and casting the energy out. As with Cheryl Paulson, I let it sink onto the keyboard while I focused on it, running my mind over it and picking it apart molecule by molecule.

I couldn’t see the wear on the keys. Instead, I had an innate sense of it, a subatomic topography. The ‘e’ key was the most warn, and had the greatest buildup of oils on it. The ’s’ key, the ‘g’, the ‘q’, the ‘u’, the ‘1’, the ‘7’, the ‘9’. I rattled them off to Rose, who wrote them down on the board.

“I think that’s it,” I said, opening my eyes. I looked over at the letters and numbers.

“Clearly a man of great intelligence,” Gervais said. “He very obviously used at least part of his birthday in the password.”

Rose nodded. “And only four letters are especially warn. I’m not so sure about ‘e’ though. That’s the most popular letter in the English language.”

“How do we know if a letter is used more than once in the password?” Gervais said.

“We don’t,” I replied. “We just have to try them. Let’s start simple, and work our way up.”

Rose took over at the computer, while I worked with Gervais to start outputting combinations of letters and dates. The number of possibilities was still quite large, though the demon seemed be able to create and track them with no amount of effort.

It took an hour to come to ‘squeegee61669’. In the end, it was the ‘q’ and ‘u’ that helped us narrow it down. We made the assumption they went together, and if they were together that the password was an actual word, and not a random combination. I was amazed by Gervais’ knowledge of the english language. It was as though he had a dictionary in his head.

“Check ‘eProcure’ first,” I said, once Rose was in. I wandered over to the doorway at the same time, making sure we were still alone. We were.

“Landon, I think I have something,” she said a few minutes later.

“What is it?”

“The ‘classified’ titles are gone. One of them is called Project Fog.”

“As in, Fist of God?”

She smiled. “I think so. I’m inside the shipping system. There are dozens of deliveries here. Looks like part numbers and abbreviated descriptions. I can’t make out most of them, but it seems one is for a laser engraving machine.”

“A machine like that wouldn’t be able to make scripture small enough,” I said.

“An early effort,” Gervais said.

“Anyway, that’s not the most interesting part. There are a ton of imports. There’s one export, out to Shenzhen, China. Get this, the listed contents are two workstations, a 3d printer, and a ‘project prototype’.” She did the air quotes for effect.

“Does it say who it was delivered to?”

“Hang on.” Her eyes followed her scroll. “Here it is. Some place called THI.”

I felt my heart bang against my chest. “Taylor Heavy Industries.”

“You know it?”

“The founder, Rachel Taylor, was a friend of mine. She was Touched. THI is a subsidiary of Taylor Enterprises, a publicly traded company whose shareholders indirectly include the Vatican, among other wealthy Christian entities.”

“Oh. Do you think she knows anything about this?”

I shook my head, feeling an old wound threatening to reopen. “I doubt it. She’s dead.”

Her lips formed a thin line across her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

“At least we got something out of this trip,” Gervais said.

“Let’s see if we can get more. Rose, can you find out where Project Fog was being developed? I have a hard time believing that the United States government was funding angelic research, which means that there are probably other engineers here who worked on parts of it besides Zheng, and who didn’t know who or what it was they were actually doing the work for. They may have left evidence on their workstations. Blueprints, research notes, that kind of thing.”

“Sure. Just one second, I can see which building the incoming orders were delivered to.” She starting tapping the keys for a second, and then stopped. Her head turned towards the window on her right. “Landon. Oh, shit. We’ve got company.”

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I threw my power out towards the window, even as the trio of angels swooped in and through it, sending shattered glass pouring into the room. I clenched my jaw, using the energy to catch it, to keep it from exploding onto Rose.

She pushed the chair backwards, rolling away from the desk, and at the same time ripping open the top of her blouse and tearing her cursed dagger away from its hiding place beneath her breasts.

The glass fell to the ground in a neat line.

The angels straightened up.

“You must be the diuscrucis,” one of them said, looking down at the glass. He stepped forward. “My name is Abraham.”

“Abraham, there are only three of you here,” I said.

He smiled. “We just want to talk.”

“Oh? What about?”

He motioned towards the workstation. “A… flaw, in our plan. We want to discuss a potential agreement.”

I stared at him. The balance had been easier to maintain up until now, because evil had a tendency to be a lot more prevalent than

good. Sure, there were a lot of people in the world who would hold open a door for somebody, do volunteer work, or donate to charities. Those were good things, but when you compared them to brutal murder, rape, genocide, war, it took a lot to even it all out. Eight years, and only now were the angels moving to gain the upper hand.

Abraham was stalling. Buying time to get a Fist here? Did they know we discovered where their toys were being produced? Would they try to shut it down and move it before I could get there, or would they do their best to end this right here and now?

Time was never on our side. We had less of it now.

Eight years, and now I would have to kill them.

Like I had said to Rose, I didn't want to do it. I didn't like doing it. It made me feel dirty, because following God or not following God, killing was wrong.

It was also necessary.

I threw the power out, catching Rose's dagger with it, tearing it from her grip and sending it into Abraham's chest. He glanced down at it, and then looked at me accusingly as the poison started to spread.

His companion reached for the holy water at his hip, the salve that would stop the demonic poison from killing him. The other drew his sword.

Gervais was himself again, and he leaped forward, grabbing the dagger from Abraham's chest, catching the second angel's stroke in a strong hand, and reversing the knife back and up into his throat. All in one motion, he kicked the holy water from the first angel's hand, sending it spilling out onto the floor.

"No cheating," he said. He stabbed the remaining angel in the stomach, and then freed the blade by kicking the seraph out the window. He was still screaming, even after his body thumped against the cement below.

I looked at Rose. She was frozen in place, tears running from her eyes. I couldn't blame her for her reaction. I had cried the first time, too.

"We need to go," Gervais said, pointing out into the night. "Your friend is coming. He brought reinforcements."

"We can't outrun an angel," I said.

"No. We can hide."

"There's no time." I looked back at Rose. She hadn't moved.

“You need to get her out of here.”

“Ugh.” He curled his lip and shook his head. “Why did you bring her along, again?”

“Just do it.”

I could see them now, a dozen angels. It was a massive force considering how few of them there were on Earth. Two of the armored Fists dangled from their arms. I didn’t see Adam. Was he out there?

Gervais ran over to Rose, bending down and lifting her. She went limp in his arms at first, and then started screaming and fighting against his grip.

“Put me down. Damn it. I’m okay.”

I didn’t have time to see what happened next. I took three quick steps and jumped out the window.

Breaking my fall with the power had been a lot of trial and error, a lot of broken bones. At first I had used a helmet to make sure I didn’t smash my skull on a particularly bad drop. In time, I graduated to greater and greater heights, learning to measure the amount of energy to use to come down in perfect, and perfectly cool, three-point landings. My personal best was sixty-one stories.

Ten was easy.

I hit the ground and rolled to my feet, shifting the energy into my limbs, hitting the gas and running as fast as I could. It was nowhere near fast enough to outrun a seraph in flight, but I wanted to lead them away.

I looked up and back. They were closer now, much closer. The parking lot was in front of me, and beyond it a fence. On the other side was the drab brown wilderness I had been disparaging earlier.

I was halfway across the lot when the first angel landed in front of me. She was short and stocky, with a cherubic face and long brown hair. Her sword was already in hand.

I didn’t slow. I swept my arm out in front of me, and she flew from my path, her wings unfurling and shifting to keep herself from falling.

The fence was getting closer. So were the angels with the Fists, the heavy machines making them just a little bit slower than the others. The rest of the angels had split away, and I saw them going for the building. For Rose and Gervais. I was tempted to turn, to make a move on them. Gervais would handle it. He was an evil son of a bitch, but he was a survivor. The armors were my problem.

I reached the fence and vaulted it with a flow of energy, easily clearing the barbed wire and landing in the trees on the other side. The angels wouldn't be able to drop the Fists there, the space was just too small, their momentum too great. I thought I heard one grunt as they were forced to go up and over.

I stopped running.

It was eerily quiet in the thin copse of trees. I closed my eyes, feeling the light breeze against my face, feeling the density of the earth beneath my feet, the unhurried beating of my heart. I gathered the power, holding it in my soul.

The calm before the storm.

I felt the earth shake when the Fists were dropped onto it. I heard the breeze blow past my ears from their displacement of the air. My heart began to beat harder, and I pulled the stone from my pocket and brought the spatha to my hand. The trees weren't much, but against two of the Fists, with four arms laden with bolts, I needed all the obstacles I could find.

A cracked branch on my left. Another on my right. I could see the faint blue glow of their activated scripture out of the corner of my eyes. I dropped to my knees without thinking, letting my intuition guide me. I felt the bolts go past, crossing one another in perfect harmony, missing my body by fractions of an inch. I caught them with my power and twisted, turning the energy with me, spinning like a tornado and casting them back towards large, dark shadows. My aim was a little off. The trunks of two trees splintered from the force of the missiles that hit them.

One of the trees didn't survive.

The first crack was followed by a second, and it started to fall behind me. I jumped up, vanished the sword, turned, and ran towards it in a mad dash, watching the branches sweeping down, the trunk moving ever closer to the ground. I could hear the motion behind me, the two Fists breaking from cover together, their motions mirrored perfectly. I dove ahead, my stomach hitting the ground, my momentum carrying me under the falling tree and through to the other side. I was lashed with leaves and branches, one of which dislocated my shoulder as I went by. Then it made a final, loud, echoing sound when it completed its crash, the thickness enough to block the angelic knights for a few seconds.

I got to my feet and grabbed my arm, pulling it back into place. The pain was intense, and I was grateful for how quickly I was able

to heal. I kept running, moving out into the grassy hills, away from the woods. I had been wrong about the cover of the trees. It gave them a better opportunity to catch me in a crossfire. If I could see the bolts, I could stop them. If I could see the Fists, I could avoid them.

For how long?

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I kept running, pushing harder, sending myself hurtling along the landscape. I glanced back every few seconds, checking on the Fists and making sure they weren't gaining.

They weren't. They weren't losing ground either. They kept pace behind me in complete synchronization, their feet moving and falling at the exact same time. I wondered if they would take a shot at me - when they would take a shot at me. I was surprised they hadn't already.

Except, I couldn't keep this up forever. Sooner or later, I was going to have to turn and fight.

I reached a small hill and barreled up it, deciding then that I would hit them from the other side, where I could launch something of an ambush. I hit the decline and dropped onto my ass, letting the speed slide me down the hill. I stopped myself about halfway, drew the obsidian blade, and waited.

The moment their heads crested the rise, I pushed out with my power, sending a cloud of dirt out behind me, and shooting at them like a rocket. I held the blade out wide, swinging it hard at the Fist

on the right, my aim for the space between the helm and the body.

The blade crashed into an angled bit of metal that had been welded to the original design, scripture connecting and covering the new addition, which made the junction of head and torso even smaller then before. The lettering flared as the sword smacked it, catching the blow and throwing me off balance.

I must have spun thirty times before I even hit the ground, and another thirty as I rolled back down the slope. I hadn't even come to a stop before I was back on my feet, the Fists turning themselves, their arms out. Two more bolts came my way, and I swept the power out, pulling them down into the ground ahead of me. The neck had been a weakness I exploited once. They had updated the design to make sure I couldn't use it again.

I set myself in a crouch, holding the sword out in front of me. They drew closer, their blades extending from beneath their wrists.

They were bearing down on me from the slope.

A glow behind them caught my eye.

It was airborne, distant, barely noticeable over the Fist's shoulder at least a mile away. It would have been easy for someone to mistake for a star, or an airplane, or any number of things, except it was in my line of sight.

It was Divine.

Adam.

It had to be. He was here. He was watching. Was he commanding them? Did he know I had seen him?

They slowed as they reached me, leading with their blades. I was skilled enough to bat the first round aside, to parry and turn and parry and duck and parry and twist. I pushed back against them with my power, using their mass to throw myself back. I took the split second to look out to the sky again, finding the blue glow framed by a wisp of clouds.

It was obvious to me that I couldn't fight the Fists on my own and win. That left me with only one other option, a long shot hope. I gathered my power and pushed it into the ground with enough force to catapult myself high into the air, a hundred feet or more. The Fists tracked the movement, their bodies shifting, their arms coming to bear and their entire payload of bolts sparking and releasing towards me.

Did they think I couldn't catch them all?

I couldn't. One grazed my thigh, while another sank deep into

my gut. I felt the pain at the same time I did catch the rest, wrapping them up in my power and redirecting them, pushing so hard that for a few seconds I couldn't breathe at all.

I didn't see if they had hit their target. I reached the top of the leap and started to fall, all of my energy spent on throwing the missiles. I must have done something right, because as I fell I saw the Fists turn away from me and sprint away from the scene.

I hit the ground hard, the force pushing the bolt in my gut deeper into me. I spit up blood at the same time I pushed the power to the site, using it to wrench the missile the rest of the way through my back and then heal the damage. I rolled over and jumped up. I had to see why the Fists had run.

I reached the top of the hill. They were half of a mile away, headed for the blue glow that was now resting on the ground. I could make the figure of the angel out now. It *was* Adam.

I gathered my power, feeling lightheaded at the exertion of it, the disruption in my soul renewed. If Adam was here, commanding these Fists, he couldn't be in Shenzhen, or in Heaven warning the rest of the Inquisitors about what we had discovered. There was no way I was going to be able to kill him with the Fists there, but I needed to at least slow him down.

The answer was beneath my feet. It was going to take all of my strength to make it happen, and I wasn't sure if I even could. There was no other choice.

I started running towards them, as fast as I could. I needed to get there before Adam or the Fists could pull the bolts from his body, before he could heal and get airborne again. I needed to reach them while they were distracted, and their guard was down.

I covered the ground quickly, my legs churning, my arms out at my sides. I got within a hundred feet, close enough so I could see Adam's pained expression from his position between the Fists kneeling on either side of him. Close enough so I could see the blood-soaked toga, and the three bolts still embedded in his body.

Close enough that he could see me, too.

His metal hand shifted on the ground, and the two Fists turned their attention towards me.

Too late.

I slid to a stop, throwing the power down into the earth. The dry, loose earth. Then I pulled.

The ground started shaking around us, as the composition was

changed in a near instant. Adam didn't even have time to say anything before the sudden sinkhole swallowed him and the Fists, dropping them into a deep pit.

I pushed the top layer of earth, using it to fill in the new hole.

Using it to bury the seraph alive.

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I returned to the parking lot on rubbery legs, fighting to keep moving, to get back to Rose and Gervais. My heart was pounding, my head ached. I was even sweating. I hadn't forced that much from the energy before, and the resulting discomfort was threatening to drop me with every step.

The lot was still mostly empty. Everything was quiet. I found Sarah's Ford in her assigned spot.

Rose was sitting on the hood, knife in hand, her hair disheveled, her clothes bloody. Gervais was leaning up against the side of the car, looking like he'd missed the entire thing. His eyes opened a little wider when he saw me.

Rose slid off the car, walking towards me, a smile forming on her haggard face. She threw her arms out wide as I neared, and I took her up on the offer.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She held me tight, pushing herself into me.

"I'm fine, all things considered," she said into my neck. "I was worried about you."

I pulled away and turned her back towards the car. We were on the clock. “Are you injured?”

She twisted to show me a light nick on her shoulder. “That one was close. Otherwise, none of the blood is mine.” She was sad when she said it, and I knew why. The blood of angels. “Did you destroy the Fists?”

“Not exactly.”

We reached the car and Gervais. He straightened up. “You’re alive,” he said.

“So are you.”

“He almost wasn’t. I saved him.”

His face twisted when she said it.

“You saved him?” I didn’t hold back my laugh. If I had a chance to upset him, I was going to take it.

“I was fine,” Gervais said. “I knew the seraph was there.”

“Right. Whatever you say. Did any of them escape?”

He glowered and shook his head. “No.”

I didn’t want to say ‘good’, even though it was good. Adam wouldn’t remember our fight, but I was sure he would put two and two together once he got out of his predicament. Why else would he be buried right outside of Los Alamos?

“There were two Fists, and Adam was here. I think he has a connection to them, that he’s commanding them. Maybe through his mechanical arm. I couldn’t kill them. I buried them out there.” I pointed back to the hills. “He can’t suffocate, and the soil there is loose. I bought us some time, nothing more. We need to get to Shenzhen, to get to Matthias before he digs his way out.” I looked at Gervais. “We need reinforcements. Someone strong enough to use a rift.”

“And you think I know this person? My domain is in Europe.”

“You’re seven hundred years old. You’re telling me Valerix is the only demon you knew here?”

“Let me think on it.”

“Fine. In the meantime, you need to drive us out of here. Let’s head back towards Santa Fe.” I took hold of the power, the act making me nauseous. I pushed it out towards Rose, using it to break apart the blood and scrape it from her clothes. It floated to the ground as ash. “Just in case any of the perimeter guards are Awake. I don’t really feel like getting shot at again right now.”

She smiled. There were goosebumps on her arms. “That felt

weird. Good weird."

Gervais went around to the driver's side, morphing back into Sarah Mitchell. "You two want to screw around in the back seat? I can pretend not to be disgusted."

I walked over to the back door of the car and opened it. Rose slid across the seat, and I joined her in the rear. Gervais got behind the wheel and got us moving.

"Tell me what happened," I said, leaning my head back and closing my eyes. The whole world felt like it was spinning out of control in the darkness.

"We ran for the elevator, but we didn't make it. The first group came in through the windows. They didn't pay me that much attention at first. They went right for Gervais. He killed three of them before I could even think to fight. Then I remembered what you told me. I remembered Anita. I thought about all of the people who would suffer."

"How noble," Gervais said over his shoulder.

"Shut up," I said.

"He's still pissy about me saving him. Like I said, he killed three of them, but there was a fourth - a boy. He looked like he was maybe fifteen, sixteen. He came out of the office behind him, his sword already raised to stab him in the back. I grabbed him and cut his throat." Her face paled. Her eyes teared.

"He wasn't fifteen," Gervais said. "I knew that one. Siculus. He was older than me. He was a Spartan. One of the three hundred. He died at Thermopylae."

"Bullshit," I said.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"The Greeks didn't go to Heaven, they were polytheists."

The demon laughed. "You aren't going back far enough. God was very patient with His creations. He gave them quite a while to settle into the idea of His existence, seeing as how it is so very magnificent." His voice dripped sarcasm.

"Were you trying to make me feel better, or worse?" Rose asked. "Whether I killed a fifteen year old boy, or a two thousand plus year old angel. I still killed an angel to save your disgusting ass. You killed my sister, and I saved your life? How messed up is that? Nothing is ever going to make me feel less dirty for that one."

"I suppose there is always a silver lining," he replied. "Needing a mortal to save my life is the meaning of embarrassing. How weak

and pathetic I have become."

"Can you both stop?" I said. I wanted to be more sympathetic to Rose. I just wasn't in the mood, and their arguing wasn't doing anything for my headache. "Rose, do you know what happened to the angels that were carrying the Fists?" I had forgotten about them until now. If they had escaped, we were going to be in trouble.

"They caught us on our way to the car. That's how I got this." She pointed at the cut again. "It would have been deeper if I hadn't managed to get my knife up in time."

"They must have been initiates, the way they fought," Gervais said. "Clumsy."

"I hope that isn't true," Rose said. "I barely beat one of them in the same time he killed the rest. I know you wanted to train me, and to find others like me to train. I'm not feeling very positive about that idea right now."

I looked at her, trying to calm the doubts in my soul. I didn't just want to. I needed to. It was the only way I would ever be able to rest. If it took a hundred years, a thousand, ten thousand. I could be patient as long as I knew the end would come one day.

In any case, she'd gone into this whole thing with a minimum of experience, and no real protection from the Divine. I wasn't going to tell her, but the fact that she was still alive was an achievement by itself. Her odds of survival would only go up once I could get her with Elyse. The Nicht Creidem knew every trick in the book for defending themselves against the Divine, and she would pass that knowledge on.

"You'll get better with more experience," I said. "I believe in you."

She smiled and wiped the tears from her face. "Thanks."

"Please," Gervais said.

He slowed the car as we went back out through the access point, and then we were away. He got us back out onto the highway and pointed us towards Santa Fe. We rode in silence for a while, taking comfort in the minutes of peace. I closed my eyes and worked to steady my breathing, to calm the storm of power in my soul.

My eyes were still closed when I felt a pressure on my leg. I opened them to find Rose's head there, the rest of her curled up on the seat next to me. Her eyes were closed, and a moment later a soft snore started rising from her.

"Touching, really," Gervais said. I saw his eyes watching us in

the rear view.

"Do you have to be like… that… *all* of the time?" I asked.

He looked away. Was he actually embarrassed?

"You wouldn't understand, diuscrucis. You aren't capable."

"Try me."

"I miss my sister."

"You're kidding?"

"No. Think what you want. I loved her, in the way that I am capable. Especially when we were mortal. I protected her. I cared for her. Now she is gone. To where, I don't know, but her soul is lost. Never again will I sense it. Never again will I speak to her. I find I am capable of sadness and I feel it at these thoughts."

The honesty made me uncomfortable. "I miss her, too, but I know for a fact that her soul isn't lost. It's up there, a part of the universe, a shared part of all creation." She was with Charis, with Clara, with the essence of the Beast, and with all the angels and demons we had killed. With every soul that had finished its journey. It was pure energy, the energy that allowed all universes to be in the first place. It was part of the balance. "Nothing else has ever made you sad?"

"No. Angry, yes. Violent, yes. Not sad." He took a deep breath and sighed it out. "I will kill you one day, if someone else doesn't do it first. Now that you know this flaw, I have more incentive."

I didn't respond. I closed my eyes again, and started absently stroking Rose's hair. In that moment, I wanted the human connection.

"One other thing, Landon," Gervais said.

"What?"

"I have thought of a demon that can help you, if you can talk him into it. I'm going to bypass Santa Fe."

"Where are we going?"

"Mexico."

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It was a five hour drive from Santa Fe to the border. I slept for three of them, waking up feeling a little more composed and a lot more hungry. Rose was awake by then, too, though she had left her head on my lap, and shifted so she was laying on her back. I opened my eyes to see her looking up at me, watching me.

“Hey, handsome,” she said.

For once, Gervais didn’t make a comment.

“Me? No. How are you feeling?”

“A little better. I’d love a shower and a change of clothes.”

It was true that the blood, sweat, and dirt hadn’t done much for her smell. We had some extra clothes for her in the trunk. We’d need to do something about the shower.

“Gervais, any hotels coming up on the route?” I asked.

He pointed at the dashboard. “I don’t know how to work this thing. The user interface is sloppy, the heuristics are terrible.”

Rose sat up, leaning between the seats. “You whine too much,” she said, tapping the screen until she got into the nav system. “I’ll give you a pass because you’re an old man, not used to this

newfangled technology."

He glared at her. I smiled. She certainly seemed refreshed.

"Ten miles. Can we stop there?"

"Thirty minutes, max," I said.

"More than enough."

Ten miles brought us into Las Cruces, and we pulled off I-25 and into the parking lot of a Fairfield Inn. Rose grabbed the extra clothes we'd bought from the trunk and we went inside together. Ten minutes later I was sitting on the king bed in our room, listening to her singing in the shower.

She was quick enough that she only got through one song, popping out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. I handed her the stack of clothes, and turned my back when she dropped the towel.

"You're cute," she said. "You weren't so chivalrous when I was doing the pushups."

"Truth be told, I barely noticed you then."

"Oh." She seemed surprised. I imagine she wasn't used to men not noticing her. "What changed?"

"I've spent more time with you. I've been so distant from people for so long. I feel like I'm getting too close, too fast. I've known you for what? Two days? I hardly know anything about you."

"So you're saying you aren't looking because you have more respect for me?"

"Kind of. I have more awareness of you. Of your humanity. And of my own. I admire your strength, your courage. I think you're beautiful."

She put her hand on my shoulder. I glanced back. She had her clothes on, so I turned around.

"I don't get what the problem is," she said. "You know I'm not shy. I don't care if you look."

"I care. Even so, it's not the physical part of it. It's the emotional. I don't trust what I feel. Not in this. It's too easy for me to latch onto the first person I spend time with. Because I'm really attracted to you? Or because I've been alone for so long? Or because I'm just glad to feel more human? I can't answer any of that right now, and that's before I factor in all of the complications that go with being near immortal."

If she were someone else, someone less self-assured, I might not have felt as comfortable saying those things as I did.

"You're probably also afraid you'll get attached, and I'll die."

That was her response. She said it straight, just part of the conversation.

“There’s that, too.”

She leaned down and kissed my cheek. “It’s okay, Landon. I understand. I’ll try not to be so obviously sexy around you. Just know that I’m here, and right now I’m interested. Varium et mutabile semper femina. That’s Virgil. Dante probably heard that one straight from the horse’s mouth. If and when you want to talk about it, tell me.”

A shifty, fickle object is woman, always.

I laughed and stood up. “Time to go.”

We went back down to the car. Gervais was standing there, drinking coffee.

“You like coffee?” I asked.

“More than blood,” he replied. “I never had to resort to such grotesquery as an archfiend.” He tipped the cup up and downed the rest, and then threw the empty paper onto the sidewalk. “I do prefer it in a nice porcelain.”

We swapped drivers. Rose took the wheel, I rode shotgun, and Gervais regained the back, spreading himself out on the seat.

“So, you were right that we don’t know each other very well,” Rose said a few minutes later. “We have some time.”

“I don’t know. You might want to be careful about what you say in front of him.”

“You think I care about her family, or her childhood, or her favorite color? Or yours for that matter?” Gervais said.

We’d already talked a lot about her sister, her time at school, and a little bit about her parents during our first day together, when we’d gone shopping for the clothes to attract Gervais, and the food that was probably going to spoil before she got to eat any of it.

“Have you ever been to Mexico?” I asked.

“No, believe it or not. My father was born in Mexico City, but he came to the States as an illegal back in the ‘70s. He started out mowing lawns, washing cars, working hard until he got his citizenship. He never wanted to go back. He said to Anita and me, ‘Forget that culture. This is our home, this is our culture. Be proud of where you are. Trees have strong roots, and when there is a drought they wither and die.’” She took on a deeper accented voice to mimic her father.

“Your father sounds like he has a good approach to life,” I said.

“I think so. He’s a strong man, and he made sure to raise us to be strong. He never wanted us to fall into bullshit female stereotypes. ‘Anything a man can do, you can do. You know why that makes you better? Because you can do something a man can never do.’” She laughed. “I know he was never that happy with Anita and me when it came to some things, but he raised us to make our own decisions, to stand on our own. He always respected us as much as he respected our mother, and I love him more for that. What was your father like?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. He ditched my mom and me when I was a baby. From that, my guess is that he was an asshole.”

Gervais laughed at that statement. “It sounds like he was smarter than you give him credit for.”

I ignored his remark.

We spent the next hour telling stories. Gervais was mostly quiet, save for his occasional jabs and barbs, though he did share one tale about a time he and Josette had collected money for the poor, and then used it to buy themselves candy instead. Their parents had discovered the deceit, and punished them for their trickery. I had heard Josette tell the story. She had made her parents sound stern and well-intentioned. To hear the demon tell it, they were self-serving idiots who sacrificed their own well-being and comfort in search of some kind of emotional fulfillment from an unresponsive and useless God, and took His ambivalence towards them out on their children. He blamed them, and he blamed God. It was what made him who he was today.

It was four in the morning when we reached El Paso. The city was quiet this early, and we cruised through without having to slow for too many lights. I was thankful we had made pretty decent time down from Los Alamos. I was also nervous. I didn’t know how long it would take Adam to get free.

The border crossing was open twenty-four/seven, and it was relatively quiet. We waited in line for ten minutes before reaching the Mexican side, and we were fortunate enough to get the green light and avoid a search by customs. A little bit of misdirection and sleight of hand by Gervais to manage our passports, and we made it through as uneventfully as I could have hoped for.

“So, we’re in Mexico,” I said. “Now how do we find this demon of yours?”

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“His name is Espanto,” Gervais said. “He’s a fiend. A fiend with more power than he deserves. Whatever bad things happen in this city, they happen because he wants them to.”

“Espanto?” Rose said. “Terror?”

“Yes. I sent Izak to speak to him once, when he still had his tongue. Izak wasn’t afraid of anything, but he was wary of him.”

“So, you don’t actually know Espanto?” I said. The idea of Izak being cautious around any demon made me a little uneasy.

“I know of him. I know where to find him. I know he has a rift, and that he can use it. The rest is up to you.”

We drove through the streets of Juarez. It was more brown here, more sparse, more poor. There was a lot of traffic for the early hour, the border crossing providing plenty of reason for people to be passing through. Gervais followed the navigation to a place called ‘Ghost Salvage’.

It was a junkyard.

The gates were closed when we pulled up to it, a ten foot tall, faded green fence blocking our view of the inside of the property.

We rolled to a stop and Gervais got out of the car, beckoning me to follow him. A moment later, a face appeared at the top of the fence.

A vampire.

"We're closed," he said in spanish, peering down.

"Don't be your usual annoyingly polite self," Gervais whispered. "Espanto respects toughness and power above anything else."

"Even if I kill half his servants?"

"You can kill every servant here. He'll enjoy that. He has plenty more. This entire city is his. Not just the Divine. The murderers, the drug lords, the pimps and prostitutes, even the crooked corporate suits."

"Why isn't he an archfiend?" I asked.

"He's not as, shall we say, ambitious, as some of us. He's content with his single city."

"I said, we're closed," the vampire repeated. "Get lost."

Gervais raised his eyebrows at me.

"Fine." I used my power to pick up a small piece of cement, and threw it at him. It struck the vamp between the eyes, knocking him from his perch.

"This should be fun," Gervais said, reaching down and finding his dagger. Rose hopped out of the car, already armed.

"What's going on?"

I reached out and took hold of the wooden gate, pulling it and breaking it into splinters that exploded to either side of us. I could see the junk behind it now: stacks of cars both crushed and whole, mounds of scrap metal and engine and wires. It was arranged in a chaotic pattern, organized to prevent a quick rush into the center of the yard.

I started moving in.

They started shooting at us.

"Guns?" I said, as the pops echoed in the night, the bullets whizzing past, or digging into the dirt around us. I looked back and saw Rose duck behind the car, covering her head to keep from being hit while bullets pinged against it and shattered the windshield. "You could have warned me."

"I didn't know," he said, dashing away, towards a pile of junkers to the right. I could see the light of muzzle flashes coming from there. More gunfire was pouring in from the left.

Only for a second. I threw out the energy, pushing the stack of cars over, crushing the vampire beneath it.

The shots stopped from the right as well, Gervais having reached the demon and put him down. He rose from the position, firing back at another stack.

A bullet hit me in the leg. Another in the chest. I cursed and pushed them out, healing at the same time I got the spatha to my hand. I leaped forward, landing on the stack of cars and tumbling over. They had been arranged so that the open space was a nest in the center of a square of junk, and four vampires all turned as I came down, trying to get their weapons trained on me. Enough bullets would slow me down long enough to lose my head.

I ducked low, sweeping the sword across, making deep gashes into two of their legs with the blessed side. The afflicted vampires stopped aiming and began to scream, their wounds hissing and steaming. The other two dropped the guns and jumped at me, claws and teeth bared.

I punched one in the face, rocking him back into the cars, turned and grabbed the other by the neck, throwing him into the wall. The first bounced back up, only to impale himself on the sword. The second managed to get his claws on me, scraping through my shirt and drawing a line of blood.

Everything paused for a second, while he waited to see the black lines of poison spread from the wound. When it vanished instead, he put up his hands.

Toughness and power. I cut off his head.

I leaped to the top of the stack, catching another bullet in my thigh for the effort. I had passed the first row of cars, and from up here I could see there were three more before we would reach an aluminum barn in the center. I looked back for Gervais, finding him and Rose crouched under cover, returning fire. I didn't know how well Lucifer had protected him from normal projectiles, but he didn't seem too keen on being blasted.

I jumped from one stack to the next, coming down on the shooters and ending their lives, before hopping back up and heading for another. I was nearly done with the second row when the doors to the barn opened, and a man and woman walked out.

The woman shifted, her body morphing and growing into the massive form of a Great Were. The man found me, and then launched a heavy blast of hellfire my way. I jumped backwards, coming down behind the cars even as they were turned to molten slag. I made my way back to Rose and Gervais.

Espanto was starting to take things a little more seriously.

"He's got a Great Were," I said.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that?" Gervais replied with a grin.

I heard it coming, the snarling and scraping moving at speed through the garbage. Great Weres were the most physically strong and agile demons on Earth, their strength borne of the gift of power bestowed on them from a higher order demon. They were vulnerable to scripture like any Hell spawn, but that was only useful if you could hit them hard enough to pierce their thick hides.

The Were barreled around the corner, planting claws off the cars to change direction and launch itself towards us. Rose and Gervais opened fire at her massive, fourteen foot frame, even as I pulled a car from our right and slammed it into the creature. She tumbled to the side, the shell of the car landing on top of her. She kicked it away and started to roll back to her feet.

I hadn't forgotten the other one, the fiend who had shot the hellfire at me. I spun, pushing the dry ground outward around us, lifting up dust and debris and sending it out like a sandstorm, using it to give us cover. Rose and Gervais opened fire through it, and I heard the Were yelp as she was peppered with bullets. They would only slow her down for a second or two.

"Get out of here," I said to Rose, pointing to the window of a car, aiming her towards the center of one of the nests. She got up and ran to it, climbing in, with Gervais right behind.

They had just cleared the space when the Great Were pounced into the middle of the maelstrom.

Her claws almost tore me in half. I fell backwards, pulling strength to my limbs just in time to catch the follow up blow and throw her back again. I saw a shape in the dirt and dust, and then the fiend appeared inside my circle, his hand coming up to burn me in hellfire.

I stopped the tornado and dove to the right, avoiding the flames, rolling to my feet, and rushing him. I heard the Were behind me, could feel her claws scraping at my leg as she tried to stop me. The wound burned from the poison, and I didn't stop to heal it. I dove ahead, hoping that the fiend didn't want to risk burning his accomplice at my back.

He didn't. He sidestepped and backpedaled, trying to avoid my attack. He was too slow. I caught his neck in my hand and drove him backwards to the ground, coming down on top of him.

“Wait,” he said, his voice strained by my constriction of his airway. He wasn’t talking to me. He was talking to the Were.

I looked back. She shifted again, returning to her human form. She stood completely still, her angry eyes watching me.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” the fiend said. “The diuscrucis.”

I nodded. “I need to see Espanto.”

“You’re looking at him.”

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I let go of his throat, and moved off him so he could get to his feet. He smiled as he pulled himself up, rubbing his neck with his hand.

"You're one tough hombre," he said. "You killed what? Twenty of my vampires? Alyx, how many ran away?"

"Two," the Great Were answered. "I'll get them later."

"You'll get them now. Make sure it hurts."

She smiled, the smile turning into a snout full of long, razor teeth. She turned and bounded off, back towards the center of the junkyard. I heard the screams when she found the deserters.

"You aren't here alone," Espanto said, pointing off towards where Rose and Gervais were hiding. "I hadn't heard anything about you keeping servants." He had a wide, bright grin. "Outside of the news that you were back to killing demons, I hadn't heard anything much about you at all the last couple of years. I take it you didn't come to off me?"

I turned back to him. I had been too busy trying not get killed to get a good look. He was short and stocky, with black hair, dark olive skin, and a square face. He was wearing a pink dress shirt

rolled to his elbows, grey suit pants, and italian leather shoes. The demonic runes inked into his arms were smoldering like a dying fire.

"No. I didn't come to off you. And they aren't servants. They're my allies. Rose, Peter, you can come out."

They came out through the stack of cars. Gervais was back in his Peter form.

"You don't look Divine," Espanto said.

"They don't smell Divine either." Alyx padded back around the corner, her voice raspy and soft despite her monstrous appearance. She returned to human form a moment later.

"Not Divine," I said. "Human."

"Nicht Creidem, human?" Espanto asked.

"No, just human," Rose said.

"Hmm…" The fiend looked away from them, no longer interested. "Alyx, meet Landon. Landon, this is my wife, Alyx."

He didn't introduce Rose or Gervais. Toughness, and power. As far as he was concerned, humans didn't have any of either, and weren't worthy of his attention. Valerix might have called them 'sheep'. She had still acknowledged they existed.

"A pleasure," Alyx said. She was a tiny thing, athletic and toned. She was wearing a pair of skintight short shorts and a strapless black tunic. Her features spoke to her Vietnamese origins, and between that and her name I had a feeling she had been born a member of Ulnyx's pack. She looked to be eighteen or nineteen, which in were years meant she was closer to seventy or eighty.

For a demon to have a single partner was rare. For a were, especially a Great Were, to take a mate outside of their kind was rarer. For them to consider themselves committed as husband and wife was unheard of. Was that why Izak had been wary? There was something odd about Espanto. He didn't seem… evil… enough. Was it the result of finding some kind of love? Or was it something else?

Espanto reached up and put his arm around my back like we were old friends. "Why don't you come inside? You can tell me what you wanted to see me about. Although, I have an idea."

"You do?"

"I think so. We can discuss it inside."

He led us through the yard to the large barn. A were changeling came out of the door as he approached, holding a silver tray in his arms.

“Your shoes,” he said in a meek voice.

Espanto started pulling his italian leathers from his feet. “If you don’t mind. I like to keep a clean house.”

Alyx was already barefoot. I guess she got a pass on the rule. I wasn’t about to give up my boots, so I gave them a push, watching the dirt and dust spread away in a puff. I did the same for Rose and Gervais.

“Cute trick,” Espanto said. “After you.” He waved me in, not waiting for the rest of the group. I heard Rose mumble something in the background.

The inside of the barn had been converted to a living space, with walls that sectioned off different rooms, and a loft that appeared to overlook most of it. The entryway was purely defensive, an open space with a good line of sight from the doorways that fed from it, as well as from above. Besides the loft, I also noticed a catwalk running the perimeter of the rooftop. I could picture Alyx up there, stalking invaders.

“Strange days,” Espanto said, leading me through the entryway, through a short corridor, and into the adjoining room. It was a large game room. Stand up video game machines, billiards, pinball. Under any other circumstances, I would have squee-d like a little girl and checked out the classic Pac-man box in the corner. “I had a feeling you would be involved in this. I didn’t expect you to show up at my door.”

“I wasn’t planning on showing up at your door.”

A vampire attendant came over to us, carrying a tray with three glasses of water.

“Drink?” he said. He took his and downed it. Picked up another and handed it back to Alyx.

I took mine and turned back to Rose and Peter. “You guys thirsty.”

“No,” Gervais said. I could tell he was amused by the whole thing.

“Yes, thank you,” Rose said.

“I didn’t offer it to them,” Espanto said, taking it from my hand before I could give it to her.

“These are my companions. A problem with them is a problem with me.”

The demon laughed. “I’ve got this intuition. It’s helped me go from being a lowly fiend, fresh out of Hell, to controlling all of

Juarez. I could have more if I wanted it. The archfiend, he's nothing to me. Weak. My army could destroy him in a blink. I don't though. You know why?"

"No."

"Intuition. A feeling that gaining too much, too soon, is bad for my health. It's bad for my long-term future. You're probably wondering what that has to do with you. I don't want to have a problem with you. My intuition tells me that you're here because you need something from me. And when you need something from someone, well then that person holds the cards, and you tend to not want to piss them off. Am I right?"

He was right. I nodded.

"So, you'll have to accept that I'm at least being gracious enough to allow your 'companions' into my home, and be satisfied with that." He handed me the water and stared at me.

Gervais had to be loving this. I drank the water and put the glass back on the tray. We kept walking.

There were other servants in the house, mainly vampires, both male and female. They were all naked, all completely shaven, their bodies bald. They wiped down the furniture, they swept the floors, they did everything they could to keep the place from collecting even a single spec of dust.

Espanto ignored them, even though they would stop what they were doing and drop to their knees as we passed. He kept us moving through the rooms in the barn, the path forcing us to spiral around towards the center. I was sure the demon had some better path through, a secret door here and there that he didn't want me to know about, just as I was sure he had a stock of 'sheep' somewhere in the barn that he used to feed all of these servants, as well as the crew he had lost outside.

"I've been hearing things for the last few weeks," Espanto said while we moved. "Entire nests of vampires getting wiped out. The angels having a new weapon. I tried to get in touch with Valerix about it, because our territories are adjacent. She was tight lipped about the whole thing, which hurt my feelings after everything the three of us have shared together." He glanced back at Alyx, who only smiled again. "I know her well enough to know that there was something she wasn't telling me, although she did give me one free bit of advice." He reached another door and pushed it open. "Protect yourself."

As I entered, I realized what he meant about having an idea. The outer part of the barn was a cover, a disguise for the demon's true home, a place to tend his herd and visit with the lessors who came for an audience. Here in the center was a cement floor, at the middle of which was what looked to me like the entrance to a fallout shelter, its cement frame rising up out of the ground, two large metal doors leading into the depths. All of it - the frame, the doors, and the floor - was covered in runes. The same runes that had decorated Valerix's mansion. Protection from angels.

Protection from the Fists.

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“You know,” I said.

“Valerix is dead, isn’t she?” he asked.

He led us to the door. It began to open as we neared, the rattle of the chains and whining of the machine that worked it echoing in the room.

“She is. Killed by a Fist.”

“Fist? Is that what they’re calling those things?”

The doors opened enough for us to go through. Espanto led us into a long tunnel that dove deeper into the earth. The door closed behind us, leaving us in pitch black.

“Lights?” I asked.

“You can’t see?” Espanto replied.

The demons would have no trouble seeing without light. I was faking my blindness for Rose’s sake.

“Afraid not.”

If they wanted to attack me, I gave them the perfect invitation. Instead, a row of dim light filled the room.

“Thank you,” I said.

We cleared the corridor, spilling out into another living area. It was as sterile as the first, though the servants had already been ordered to leave us in privacy. We took positions on the available couches. This time, Rose stayed close to me.

"There was another attack yesterday. An archfiend in Russia."

"Darya?" I asked.

"Yes. She and all of her followers. They completely cleansed Moscow in less than an hour."

That was the hit to the balance I had felt. "Do you know how many Fists were there?"

Espanto walked over to a cabinet and pulled it open. Bottles of alcohol lined the shelves, along with a few unmarked containers that I knew held more macabre concoctions. "Drink?"

"No." I didn't make the mistake of asking Rose and Gervais again. It wasn't worth making the demon angry. Not yet, anyway.

He took out two glasses and poured a bit of bourbon for himself and Alyx. "I have demons monitoring every channel I know of for communications. We're still sorting through it, but my early estimate is six or seven. It could be more. I doubt it's less." He came back and handed Alyx the drink, settling down next to her.

Six or seven? I had enough trouble with one. I fought to keep my sudden panic from showing. The archangels had commanded Adam to find a way to defeat me, and to defeat the demons. Somehow, he had discovered Matthias Zheng. Somehow, he had succeeded.

"You're struggling to fight them, aren't you?" Espanto asked.

"Not as much as the demons are, but yes."

"As I guessed. Otherwise, you would be there, and not here. Perhaps you're regretting spending the last two years killing demons?"

"I must lack your intuition. I do what I have to do."

He laughed and took a sip. "Here is what I see, diuscrucis. I see the angels winning this war. I see the Rapture coming to pass. I see the demons that are left overrunning this world, enslaving man and devouring one another. I also see you dead."

He said it as a matter of fact. As far as he was concerned, the fight was already over.

"So what are my options?" he continued. "I'm safe in here, beneath the runes and the earth. I've already removed the tongues of my servants, to ensure they can't betray me to the Heavenly host

as I imagine Valerix's minions did. I have enough stock to survive many, many years of ignorance. To spend it with my beloved in peace."

"Hiding? That doesn't sound very ambitious."

"Buying time. To see how the whole thing plays out. Which demon will emerge the strongest? We do not die, and patience is an easy practice to master when you have what you want the most." He patted his wife's leg.

"Your goal is to be second fiddle?" I asked.

"My goal is to be comfortable." He finished his drink and placed his glass very carefully on a nearby table, checking it first to make sure it wouldn't leave a spot. "I'm comfortable here. The angels can't touch me. Tell me why you came, diuscrucis. Tell me what you need from me, a lowly fiend. Let us be clear that regardless of what it is, my price will be exponentially high."

He was confident and smug. I wanted nothing more than to grind him into the floor, and mess up his painstakingly flawless environment with his blood and ash. A demon who wasn't actively interested in gaining power was the most dangerous of all.

"I need transport through a rift. I need reinforcements. I know where the Fists are being made. I know where to find their creator."

He laughed again. "You aim to stop them? I thought maybe you needed weapons, or perhaps information. That is something I would be willing to trade. Why would you think I would ever help you keep your precious balance?"

I glanced over at Gervais. His eyes danced away. Did he know Espanto would react this way? Or had he given me the only option he knew of? It would have been so much easier if I could trust him.

"You want the angels to win?" I asked.

"Someone is going to, sooner or later. Why not now? In the end, it's all the same to me. No, you have nothing I want, nothing you can provide me that is valuable enough for me to help you with this. I've decided."

He stood up, so I stood up. I didn't tell him that much about the situation. I didn't want to give him any more leverage over me. He didn't understand how important his assistance was. That he was even willing to dismiss me so readily… he was confident in his power. A fiend and a Great Were against me and my humans. He wasn't even counting them.

"I'll walk you out," he said. "I'm sorry you came all the way

here for nothing."

I looked back at Rose and then over to Gervais. They knew the gravity. I could see them both tense.

"Why would you think I would waste my time coming here, and then walk away because you decided?" I asked. I knew one way I could get his help.

The runes on his arms flared in response. "Don't make me dirty my home."

Alyx gained her feet, baring her human teeth, ready to make the change. "You've been dismissed. Best be on your way."

"I don't think you understand what I'm asking you for," I said. They were so focused on me, so worried about my ability to fight them, they didn't even notice when Rose and Gervais got to their feet.

"I do," Espanto said. "And I said no."

He was getting angry. He was about to get even angrier.

Rose grabbed Alyx from behind and put her knife to her throat. Gervais took the fiend and did the same. The Great Were was immensely powerful in monster form, and she was still stronger than normal in human form. The difference was that her throat would be much easier to slit.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Espanto said. He squirmed against Gervais' grip, finding the demon was stronger than he expected.

He morphed from his Peter form. "Hello, Espanto."

The fiend stopped struggling and turned his head, just enough to see his captor. "Gervais?"

"I bet your intuition didn't see that one coming. You should pay more attention to your enemies, regardless of their supposed origin."

Alyx growled, and found the knife pressed tighter against her neck for it.

"Don't," Rose said. "I'll take your head off before you can change."

"You're going to power the rift for me," I said. "I need to get to China, and I need to get there now."

Rose and Gervais kept a tight grip on the two demons, while they led us deeper down into the underground facility. More than once they had to order aside servants as they appeared in the long cement corridors and saw their masters held hostage. I could tell by

Espanto's strained voice how embarrassed he was. How much the situation pained him.

I didn't doubt he would kill every one of those servants once he was free, rather than live knowing what they had seen.

The rift was in a small room behind what looked like an ops center, filled with workstations and monitors, and manned by a number of still unclothed and bald demons. They were monitoring communication channels - phone services, internet packets, satellite feeds. They were also monitoring the demon's interests, tracking the drug dealers and whores, the Turned and the vamps. It looked like a sophisticated operation. The work of someone who knew that knowledge was power, and did his best to command as much of it as he could.

It was how he had known about Valerix, and about Russia, and probably a lot more than he had revealed. Given more time, I would have liked to find out how much.

"Let him go," I said to Gervais, once we were at the rift.

He relaxed his grip and pushed the fiend forward. Immediately, the runes on Espanto's arms began to flare, his eyes turning into empty black orbs.

"Don't even think about it," Rose said, pulling the knife tighter against Alyx's throat. The fiend paused.

"Damn you to hell, diuscrucis," he said. He went to the ring of stones that formed the outline of the rift, and began filling in the missing runes.

"That's what you get for falling in love," Gervais said. "A foolish emotion."

"Shut up," I said.

It only took the fiend a few minutes to wire up the rift. He knelt at one of the stones and began feeding his power into it. Fiends that were strong enough to activate rifts were incredibly rare. It was a privilege normally reserved for the most powerful demons.

It came to life, flaring into a ring of flames that illuminated the small room.

"There. It's done. Let her go."

Rose looked at me. I shook my head. "Sorry, I can't do that. Alyx is coming with us, to make sure you made the connection to the right place. If you did, she lives. If you didn't-"

"It goes to China. The closest rift is in Kowloon." His voice was strained, hinting at desperation.

I'd never seen a demon so upset. He stood at the edge of the circle, his face sweating, his hands clenched in fists. I was sure making a mortal enemy of Espanto wasn't the best idea, and I might have killed him and been done with it if I hadn't needed Alyx. A mortal couldn't travel a rift without being in contact with a demon. They would be ripped apart by the power, and Gervais' nature made me unsure if he was qualified to act as the conduit.

"Ladies first," I said, motioning to the Great Were.

They moved to the edge of the rift.

I put my hand on Rose's shoulder. "You're going to feel a little dizzy when you come out. Don't lose your grip."

She set her jaw and nodded. Then they stepped through.

"If you hurt her-" Espanto said.

"I'm not going to hurt her. I told you I needed transport and reinforcements. I'd say a Great Were is a quality reinforcement. It's not personal, Espanto. You know I can't let the angels win."

He stared at me, his eyes betraying his rage.

"Too-da-loo," Gervais said.

He stepped into the rift.

I followed after.

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One foot was in Mexico, the other was in Kowloon. That was how transport rifts worked, creating a connection between our world and Hell and back again that made the distance negligible.

Rose was on the other side with Alyx. She was pale and sweating, but she managed to keep the knife pressed against the demon's throat.

"You can let her go," I said.

Alyx's hand snapped up and caught Rose's forearm, while she used her other arm to elbow her in the gut. I could see Rose's muscles flex as she tried to pull the knife into the demon's throat, but she was stronger than I had guessed. She twisted around and got Rose to drop the blade, positioning herself behind and holding Rose's arm tight against her back. A single finger elongated into a claw, pressed against her throat.

The Great Were looked over at the rift, and then at me. I was static. Disarmed. Gervais chuckled next to me.

"You really thought a human could overpower her?" he said.

I looked over at him, momentarily confused. Then Alyx took her

hand away and shoved Rose into my arms.

"He means, I wanted to come," she said. She knelt down at the still burning rift, shifting her hand into a paw and pulling one of the flaming stones away. The smell of singed hair and flesh rose from it. The rift went out.

"Why?" I asked.

Rose pulled herself from my grip, a look of disgust on her face. She had told me she felt overmatched, and I kept trying to convince myself she wasn't. Without the tattoos and artifacts and upbringing of the Nicht Creidem, could any mortal hope to fight the Divine? Was I deluding myself because I didn't want to accept that my role as the so-called 'Great Equalizer' was an eternal one?

"He says he loves me," she said. She unbuttoned her shorts and pulled them down, just enough that I could see the fiend's brand resting on her pelvis. "This is love? He controls me." She pulled her pants back up. "He took me from my pack when I was a child. He did things to me." A low growl formed in the back of her throat, even as she spoke. "He branded me, trained me to be his bodyguard, his assassin. He took me as his mate. I couldn't break free of him, not with the brand. I learned it was easier to comply, to play along. Every day I hoped that something would happen to free me from this. Every assignment I hoped that I would be killed. I never imagined that anyone would save me." A tear ran from her eye. A tear from a Great Were? "I've heard that Ulnyx fought with you."

"He did. He was my friend."

"He was my true alpha. We would have been mated when I was older, if Espanto hadn't taken me."

"He took you?"

"He sent his demons into the pack. A distraction. I was only a pup then. He came looking for us. A female for himself, a pair of males for Valerix. My mother tried to protect me. He killed her, took me through his rift, and branded me. I've had no freedom since, until now."

"Espanto couldn't have promoted you?"

"No. He doesn't have that much power. We did a few favors for Valerix, a number of years ago. She imbued me with the power, raised me to Great as payment."

"I'm not sure what to do with you now. I was going to try to compel you to fight for me by threatening to lead the angels back to

Espanto and tearing the runes from his little hidey-hole. Obviously, that isn't going to work. I don't want to force you."

She licked the tears from her cheek with a long tongue. "I don't need to be compelled. Espanto's information network is unparalleled. I know what happened in Mumbai. I know most of the pack was killed there, helping you and Ulnyx. I know he was alpha when he died." She looked at me, her eyes going soft and big. "I know you were alpha before him."

It had been on a technicality, because the Great Were's soul had been trapped in mine. "I don't have any right to that title anymore."

"The title is yours. There is no more pack. What was left of us was absorbed or destroyed. Either way, you got me out of there. You're the closest thing I have to family. I'll stand by you."

It was a surprising twist, and for once it actually went in my favor. I looked over at Gervais, who was trying to hide a self-satisfied smirk. Had he known about Alyx's past? Had he guessed the way this would work out? Was he helping me for real? Or was there some other plot simmering beneath this one?

Either way, she was in truth still a slave to the demon. Freeing her from the brand meant cutting it from the fiend's body. Until then, only distance from him would protect her.

"I don't know if or when I'll be able to confront Espanto," I said. "Right now, I need as many powerful demons as possible to stay alive."

"It isn't my place to question you, Master," Alyx replied. Then her dark eyes sparkled. "Besides, he'll be coming after you. He'll want me back. Then he'll die."

If he came after me, one of us would. "Please don't call me 'Master'."

"That is what mates call their alpha," she said. "That is what I will call you."

I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. Mates? I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into, but the way she said it, I could tell there wasn't a lot of room for debate. I would deal with that later. We still weren't in Shenzhen, and we'd already burned almost seven hours.

"So, does anyone here have any idea where we are?"

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The rift was in the bottom of a butcher's shop, tucked into a back corner and hidden behind a false wall. Once we pushed it aside, we were let out into the basement proper - a cold storage area where racks of meats hung from the ceiling.

Some of it was human.

"I'm going to be sick," Rose said. She still hadn't completely recovered from the rift travel, and the sight of the skinned bodies was more than enough to push her to the edge. The heavy smell of meat didn't make it any easier.

"Just concentrate on walking," I said. "One foot after the other."

The place was obviously home to any number of demons. None of them were in the basement at the moment.

"Weres," Alyx said. "Mongrels. I can smell them. What time is it?"

"Here? Close to seven."

"They'll be out readying for the hunt. The meat down here is for emergencies. We prefer fresh."

"How can you eat people?" Rose said.

“How can you eat cow?” Alyx replied. “Or pigs, or deer. Rabbits, dogs, chickens. The were are children of Lucifer. We eat human meat because we cannot survive without the blood of God’s creation. Why do you eat meat?”

Rose turned red, her jaw clenching, her sickness forgotten. “Are you comparing people to cows?”

“Humans are like cows. A food source to the superior species.”

“Superior? You can’t even survive without us, and you think-“

I stepped between them. “Rose. This isn’t the time or place. Alyx, can you lead us out of here?”

“Yes, Master.” She smiled at me and walked ahead.

“I don’t like her,” Rose said, to Gervais’ amusement.

“Because of who she is, or what she is?” I said. “Not all demons are hopelessly cursed to being evil. It isn’t her fault or her choice to need human blood to survive.”

“You’re just saying that because she makes those big puppy eyes at you.”

“I’m saying that because we need any allies we can get. To keep the balance, you can’t take a side of good or evil. You need to accept both for what they are. Weres aren’t evil because they eat human flesh. That’s basic self-preservation. Weres are evil when they rape, or murder for sport, or work for others to help them do other rotten deeds. Yes, the prevalent attitude among them is to do those things. Most do, not all, and they can change. Ulnyx changed.”

I was tempted to ask her if she was just feeling jealous. I was sure I would get hit if I did.

“Just give her a chance,” I said.

We followed Alyx out of the basement, through a rusted metal door and into a crowded street. The buildings here were high and tight, the atmosphere subdued. Lit signs littered the sides of the buildings in bright colors, the pending darkness promising an amazing sight once night finished falling.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, and waited for it to get a signal. Once it did, I hit up the internet for an idea of where we were, and how far we had to go.

Too far.

“It’ll take another two hours by car,” I said. “An hour and a half by train, not including waiting times. There has to be a better way.”

“What about flying?” Rose asked. “Maybe we can get a

helicopter. Hospitals usually have one."

"Do you know how to fly it?" Gervais said.

"No. Landon?"

"I don't even like to drive," I said.

"Any other bright ideas?" Alyx asked. Hadn't it been bad enough that Rose and Gervais were always bickering, without throwing an apparently catty Great Were into the mix?

I looked up the nearest hospital. It was only a few blocks away.

"Let's head over to Kowloon Hospital. Even if we can't get a chopper, we can take an ambulance. The lights and sirens can't hurt."

We moved through the crowd at top speed, crossing over the few blocks in a hurry. The hospital was a huge, white stone building, modern and clean. It looked like any other hospital around, and could have easily been sitting in the middle of New York.

"How are we going to find the pilot?" Gervais said. "I doubt he's just hanging out in the cockpit waiting for us to ask him for a ride."

Rose shook her head. "I'm so stupid. He probably is hanging out in the cockpit. It's an emergency helicopter. He needs to be ready to go."

I looked up towards the roof. "Maybe we should drive. If there are any angels around, Alyx's aura is going to draw them right to us."

"We can leave her here," Rose said.

"We can't. We need the firepower." I kept staring up at the roof, trying to decide what to do.

"It's too risky," Gervais said. "They won't be able to attack unless we hit them first. What they will have is plenty of time to warn the others. We need the element of surprise, or they're going to spirit Zheng away before we can get close."

"Okay," I said. "Let's find an ambulance. Alyx, can you scout the perimeter?"

"Of course, Master." She smiled, her entire face growing and changing as she did. Within moments the petite woman was replaced with the hulking form of the Great Were. She stepped forward and put her muzzle against my cheek, and then turned and bounded off, vanishing from sight in a dozen long strides.

"I'm not ashamed to admit I'm a little jealous of that," Gervais said, casting a sidelong glance at Rose. He was trying to fuel the

fire.

“I’m going to take the high road,” I said, pointing to the rooftop. “I’ll be right back.” I gathered my energy and pushed it out into the ground, using the force to launch myself into the air.

Like jumping from high places, leaping to them was something I had practiced over and over again. The roof was near the limits of my reach, and I came down only a foot or so from the edge.

I looked back, scanning the front of the hospital, searching for a ride from above. Then I turned and started running for the opposite side.

An angel landed in front of me.

“Who are you?” she asked. She had dark hair, fair skin, golden eyes. “Not the demon I sensed.”

I didn’t slow down, barreling right into her and knocking her to the ground. Her wings spread beneath her, trying to find leverage to push me off. If all I had were mortal strength, she could have done it easily.

“I’m sorry,” I said, even as I found the stone with my free hand and summoned the dark sword. I couldn’t risk her getting away and telling the others.

I plunged the blade into her heart.

I’d never managed to kill an angel without feeling an overwhelming sense of failure after. This time was no different. My heart wrenched, my gut tightened, and I stumbled back to my feet, pocketing the stone and moving ahead while the poison spread and the seraph writhed and died. I looked skyward for more of them.

It was clear.

I took a deep breath and worked to force the sadness from my soul, to focus on the task at hand. Would it get easier over time? Would I want it to?

I was running for the opposite side of the roof when I heard a howl from the front. I switched directions and looked down, finding the Great Were on her haunches next to Rose and Gervais.

“Which way?” I called down.

Alyx took a few steps to the left, and paused.

“I need you to carry Rose.”

Rose looked up at me, horrified. Alyx looked back at Rose. Even from the distance, I could tell she didn’t want to. Even so, she didn’t argue. She circled back and scooped her up in a massive paw, dumping her on her back. Then she took off, Gervais racing behind

her.

I followed along the rooftop, keeping an eye out for more angels. Alyx tore around the corner, blasting past bystanders who would have no idea what they had seen. I wondered what their brains would tell them she was?

The motor pool was behind a large, barbed wire fence. Alyx leaped it without slowing, shifting upright as she did and wrapping a hairy arm around Rose to keep her from falling off. I jumped from my own perch, pushing the energy out and landing gracefully next to them. Gervais joined us a few seconds later.

"I'm fast. Not that fast," he said.

"How was the ride?" I asked Rose.

Her hair was windblown, her face blanched. "I prefer cars."

"Then you're in luck."

There was an ambulance a dozen feet away. It wasn't locked, and the keys were already in the ignition.

"I guess they thought a fifteen foot fence was good enough security," Rose said.

"Yeah, and who wants to steal an ambulance, anyway?" I said with a smile, taking shotgun. Gervais and Alyx found their way into the back.

Rose got us moving, angling us around and towards the gate. I reached out with my power, pulling it aside as we sped through, leaving the security guard stationed there with wide eyes and confused expression. By the time he recovered, he would have forgotten he saw us in the first place.

"Did you see the look on his face?" Rose's laughter was almost enough to sooth the sudden unease I was feeling.

Almost.

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We hit the sirens once we were a couple of blocks from the hospital, using them to get through lights and push the traffic out of our path. It definitely made things faster, but it wasn't doing much for the dread I was starting to feel.

Seven hours. Eight by the time we got there.

We were going to be too late.

"Are you okay?" Rose asked.

I thought about lying to her, deciding against it. "No. I don't think we're going to make it."

"Why do you say that?"

"It took too long to get here. I should have time walked. Come alone."

"Yeah, that sounds like it would have been a great idea. How do you know you wouldn't have walked right into a trap? Have you considered that maybe the angels planted the intel about Taylor? That they wanted you to find it? I mean, they knew pretty fast that we had accessed it."

I hadn't considered that.

“You said you think Adam is controlling them,” she continued. “What if Adam is only one of many? What if there are others? You could have gone in alone against who knows how many Fists.”

“We could still be going in against who knows how many Fists.”

“Yeah, but you aren’t doing it alone. I might not be strong enough to fight them directly, but I can be pretty distracting when I need to.” She put her hand to one of her breasts and lifted it up suggestively.

I laughed at that. “I don’t think the angels or the Fists will fall for your sex appeal.”

She laughed with me. “That’s better. I don’t think so either. I can be distracting in other ways. You also have Gervais, and Alyx. I don’t have to like her to see how badass she is in that monster form.”

I looked towards the back of the Ambulance. Alyx was laying down on one of the gurneys, looking oddly content. Gervais was sitting on the floor, his head down as though he were praying.

“We might die,” I said.

“If this whole balance thing is what you say it is, if we die, a lot of people are going to die. I think in that case I’ll be one of the lucky ones.”

The statement gave me a new level of respect for Rose. “You were worried before about feeling overmatched. When I saw how easily Alyx overpowered you, I was worried too. Afraid that I’m going to get you killed. Afraid that regular mortals can never be strong enough to fight back against the Divine.”

“You said the Nicht Creidem are mortal.”

“Mostly, yeah.”

“They fight back against the Divine.”

“They spend more time hiding from them. Guerrilla warfare. Anyway, they’ve had thousands of years to learn.”

“And you’re worried after two days?”

I stared at her. She shifted her eyes between me and the road. I could feel my face turning red with embarrassment.

“Seriously, Landon. You’re too intense. I mean, I know this job has pretty strict performance requirements, but you need to show a little patience. You’re immortal. If it takes you thousands of years to get us on the right track, then it takes thousands of years. If you break a few sexy little eggs like me along the way, then that’s what you need to do.”

“You’re okay with that?” I asked. “Being a broken egg?”

“I’d rather stay in one piece. I know what you’re trying to do. I’ve already seen some of the sacrifices you’ve had to make. I’ve already had to make a few myself.” She motioned back towards Gervais. “Second guessing yourself isn’t going to get you anywhere. Worrying about my lifespan isn’t going to get you anywhere. Us humans have free will, right? I decided to seek you out. I decided to sign on the dotted line, metaphorically speaking. I believe in your cause. I know Anita would have, too. I’m willing to die for it. I’m willing to die for you.”

“I can’t ask-“

“You aren’t asking anything. My decision. Calling you ‘Master’, that’s Alyx’s decision. Being an asshole… well, I don’t think Gervais can help himself. Do what you need to do. Let your allies be your allies. I might die, and you better be sad if I do. You have to go on. You have to keep fighting. Your dream will never be real if you try to force it. Work for it. Have patience.”

“I don’t want to be doing this forever. I don’t want to end up like the Beast. I don’t want this universe to end up like his universe.”

“Forever is a long time. You need to know what you want and figure out how to get it, not pin it all on hope and get yourself all worked up for it to happen right this minute. It wasn’t easy to spend two years searching for Anita’s killer. It’s even harder sitting in the same car with him. If I can do that, you can do this.”

“Wow. Good pep talk,” I said. In that moment, I really wanted to make up for missing that first kiss. Her words and attitude were inspiring.

Even if we were driving to our doom.

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We made great time, reaching the center of the city a little over an hour after we'd arrived through the rift. Between the strong words and the heavy foot, I found myself getting more impressed and enamored of Rose by the minute.

Beautiful? Check. Confident? Check. Smart? Check. Courageous? Two checks for that. Good with guns and knives? I'd never considered that as part of what made someone attractive before, but she nailed that one, too. All things considered, I was struggling to find something about her that wouldn't hit every mark on the attractiveness scale.

There *was* one thing.

She was mortal.

No matter what happened to us here and now, and no matter what happened to us in the future, if she lived she would age, and then she would die. If I fell for her, if I let myself fall for her, I was only setting myself up for heartbreak sooner or later. I'd just gone through it, and it had taken me two years to work through those emotions.

Of course, that was assuming she was even interested in me like that. Yes, she'd expressed a willingness to have sex, but her views on that were a lot more open than mine. She saw it as simple fun. I saw it as something a little more. Maybe too much more? Either way, there was a big chasm between friends with benefits and a committed relationship. I didn't believe in the first. She might not believe in the second, at least not with me.

Those were the thoughts that occupied me while we cruised through downtown Shenzhen, headed towards the industrial area near Deep Bay where the Taylor Heavy Industries factory was located. If we survived, if we stopped the Fists and the angels, Adam and Matthias Zheng, maybe then I would ask her what she thought. One thing I was glad to know is that she would be bluntly honest with me.

"Any sign of angels?" I said, turning back towards Alyx.

She raised her nose and took a few deep breaths. "Lingering scent, Master. They have been here, but not recently."

"Demons?"

"In a city this dense? For certain."

I expected as much. I also trusted they would stay far away from the hot aura that the Great Were was spilling out into our surroundings.

"How far to the factory?"

Rose glanced at my phone, resting on the dash. "Two miles."

"Let's ditch here, before the police wonder why a Kowloon Hospital ambulance is so far away from Kowloon."

Rose nodded and began searching for an open spot to leave our ride. She pulled to a stop a minute later, and we abandoned the vehicle.

"Alyx, stay alert. Tell me right away if anything Divine starts heading for us."

"Of course."

I was glad she dropped the 'Master' for once.

"Do you have a plan?" Rose asked.

I thought I did, until she had suggested that we might be walking into another trap. The angels weren't anywhere near as conniving and manipulative as the demons. That didn't mean they couldn't plan ahead.

"There's no way to know if Adam got out of the hole I left him in, or if it matters whether he did or not. We could be taking them

completely by surprise, or they may have been planning for us to show up. That means we have a fifty-fifty shot at catching them off-guard. So, I think we should hedge our bets, and hit them from both directions."

"How would you suggest we do that?" Gervais said.

"Two teams. Gervais, you and Rose will do your best to sneak into the factory. If you need to kill people to take their form and get in, do it. Alyx and I will go straight for the front door. Hopefully we'll draw out whatever kind of defense they have, Fist or otherwise, and give you a chance to get in and find Zheng."

"What about the factory workers?" Rose asked.

"Try not to kill them. Don't let them stop you," I said. "I know you don't want to. This is bigger than they are." I looked at Gervais. "If you find Zheng, capture him. Do you understand?"

Gervais grinned. "Of course."

"I mean it. I'll kill you if you hurt him."

"I shall do my best, diuscrucis."

It wasn't much of a promise. I had to trust Rose would try to stop him if he decided not to listen to me.

"Remember, whatever shit we have on each other, whatever we think of one another, this is about stopping the angels from causing the Rapture. Everyone here has their own reasons for wanting to stop it, but the common thread is that we do want to stop it. We're one team right now, with one goal, agreed?"

Alyx moved up next to me and put her arm around my waist. "As you command."

"I'm with you," Rose said.

Gervais shrugged. "Eh. Why not?"

"I did this with Obi once. It worked out pretty well. Put your hand in." I put my right hand out. Rose put hers on top of mine. Then Gervais. Then Alyx. She seemed confused by the action. "When I count to three, say 'break', and pull your hand away," I told her.

"As you say, Master."

I cringed at the word.

"Ready? One… two… three… BREAK!"

We pulled back our hands. Alyx smiled at the activity. So did Rose. Gervais looked nonplussed, and the people dividing around us in their subconscious desire to avoid the Great Were tilted their heads as if they heard our shout in a whisper on the air.

“Let’s move out.”

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My heart was pounding as I leaned against the side of a nearby building, and looked across a long, mostly empty parking lot and a few islands of trees to the front of the Taylor Heavy Industries factory. It was a long, wide, squat construct, made of dark stone with mirrored windows to hide whatever was happening inside. A stack near the center bellowed white smoke, while a number of trailers carrying shipping containers both came and went while I waited with Alyx for Gervais and Rose to make it around to the back.

"Master, why do you keep that human with you?"

I turned my head back to where Alyx was leaning against the wall, staying out of sight. "You mean Rose?"

"Yes. Is she your conquest?"

I almost laughed at the thought, except she was serious. "No. She's my friend."

"You are very powerful. Why do you want humans for friends?"

"You know I was born a human, don't you?"

She considered me for a minute. "When you were human, you

were weak. Now, you're strong. How does one so strong find anything of interest in something so weak? Espanto was once human, too. He said the strong devour the weak. The strong use the weak. That is the way the universe was made. Ulnyx once said these things, too. I remember when all the pups in the pack would be gathered, and he would tell us of our duty, and our power."

"The strong need to protect the weak, because they can't protect themselves. Ulnyx figured that out in the end."

"I should protect humans?" She made a face, disgusted by the thought. "Protect my food?"

"It's a little more complicated than that. I know Espanto looked down on mortals, to the point that he barely saw them. People are capable of a lot more than he gave them credit for. Rose is a good example. She put a knife to your throat, after all."

"I could have killed her. I would have, if Espanto had Commanded."

"Exactly. She risked her life to help me. And because of that, you're free from Espanto."

She was silent for a moment.

"You don't want her for your conquest? I wouldn't be jealous. It is expected of the alpha, and Espanto had many such prizes. Even the archfiend Valerix shared our bed."

She caught me off-guard a second time. "What? No. Humans aren't a prize. They have feelings, desires, needs. Just like you do."

"Their feelings are inferior."

"That's Espanto talking. I'm telling you that isn't true. People deserve your respect."

She wasn't convinced. "I will try, Master. The idea is very strange to me." She lifted her head, her nostrils flaring.

"Angels?" I asked.

She leaned up to whisper in my ear, her warm breath tickling me. "The building is protected. I can't smell anything inside, or sense any Divine. I was smelling your sweat. You're nervous."

"This is very important to me." I glanced down at my phone, checking the time. They should be in position soon. "Are you ready to run?"

She smiled. "Yes, Master."

"You really don't have to call me 'Master'," I said again.

"You don't want me for a mate?" she asked.

I paused. The last thing I needed was to upset her when I needed

her the most. “I didn’t say that.”

“Then why don’t you want me to speak to you as a mate speaks to her alpha?”

Somehow, I doubted that Ulnyx’s mate, Lylyx, had ever called him ‘Master’. The way he had been smitten with her, I could picture the massive Great Were calling her ‘Mistress’. Or maybe ‘Boss’. I had to remind myself that Alyx’s experience was that of a child in the pack. Her understanding of gender dynamics was bound to be a little skewed.

“Never mind,” I said. I kept my eyes trained to the rear of the building. We’d picked up a prepaid phone on the way over, and Rose was going to send me a text when they were ready.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, focusing my energy, and trying to calm my nerves.

“Landon,” Alyx said beside me.

I opened my eyes and turned towards her again. “Angels?” I asked for a second time.

She smiled. “No, Master. I… I wanted to thank you, for getting me away from Espanto. And I wanted to wish you good hunting.”

At first, I wasn’t sure what she meant. Then I noticed the look in her eyes, and the softness of her face. There were a lot of different sacrifices people made. When I leaned in and put my lips to hers, when I allowed her mouth to explore mine, it was to ensure her morale, and her ferocity. The closer to me she felt, the more intense she would be to protect me.

Not every sacrifice was difficult. Or painful.

She pulled away from me, her lips spreading in a wide smile. “I will not disappoint you.”

“I know,” I replied, returning her smile and trying to calm my heart again.

My phone vibrated against my leg.

“It’s time.”

She was shifting into her demon form before I said it. Once more, she took a moment to nuzzle my face, and then we both started running.

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We were halfway across the parking lot when it started.

“The roof,” Alyx growled next to me. I looked up, not seeing anything, trusting in her senses.

A moment later the bullets began digging into the pavement around us, the muzzles of rifles and the protected heads of a dozen Touched guards taking position to fire down on us.

They had been so quick to respond to our charge. Had my fears been realized? I scanned the sky for Adam, even as a bullet hit me in the leg and I tumbled to the ground, coming to rest behind a car

The bullets peppered it, shattering the glass and filling my ears with a sound like heavy rain. I pushed the bullet out and healed my leg, getting back to my feet at the same time Alyx reached me, changed back into her human form to fit behind the cover.

“Master?”

“I’m fine.” Except, why were they using bullets? They couldn’t kill us, only slow us down.

Something about that didn’t sit right.

“We need to make a break for it, now,” I said. “Don’t wait for

me.” They wouldn’t be able to fire down at us once we got to the entrance.

Alyx shifted again, bounding over the car in one pounce. I used my energy to push myself away, diving over the pounded metal towards the glass front of the factory.

I heard a scream, and saw the rocket launch from the rooftop. It exploded behind me, behind the car where we had been hiding only seconds before. The force pushed me forward even faster. I could see the explosion in the mirrored facade of the building. Red and blue flames. Holy flames.

They had missiles?

I hit the ground, rolling on my shoulder to my feet. Alyx was already near the entrance, waiting for me to catch up.

We were the diversion. Our part wasn’t to go inside, not yet. It was to draw the defense out.

“Up,” I shouted to her, pushing with the power, throwing myself towards the rooftop. I found the stone and brought the spatha to me.

The gunfire started again, a hail of slugs that whizzed past my ears and burned my scalp, that bit into my arms and torso and left me in burning pain, even as I landed in the midst of the shooters. My hamstring had been cut by one of the shots, and I hit the ground and stumbled, rolling away from the Touched towards the center of the building.

The gunfire didn’t stop, it just changed directions. I threw my power out around me and curled into a ball, using it to stop most of the bullets, unable to get them all. I covered my head with my hands to protect it, and gritted through the assault.

A sharp growl told me Alyx had arrived. The Touched began to scream, the din of gunfire reduced with each wet smack and thud that reached my ears. I started to heal, the silver bullets dropping to the bloody ground around me.

Silence.

I felt her hot breath against my face, and then she was nuzzling me again. I got up and patted her head. “Thank you.”

She responded with a soft whine.

The angels landed on the rooftop. They didn’t need to wait for us to attack. By killing the Touched, we already had.

They were dressed in golden breastplates and helms above leather jerkins. They held blessed swords and shields. They looked

out of place in the modern world. They looked even more out of place now that I had seen a blessed explosive decimate an entire demon army. They didn't speak, instead landing in a diamond formation and making a direct charge.

Alyx rose on her hinds beside me, spreading her arms and roaring at them. An angry Great Were was one of the most intimidating things I knew of, and it was no different for the seraphim. The charge slowed at her challenge, the less experienced soldiers losing some of their nerve at the sight and sound.

I brought the obsidian blade to bear and pushed myself forward, slamming into one of the angels, knocking him down and making a light cut along his cheek, which immediately began sprouting black lines of demonic poison. I wrenched his shield from his grip and used it to block an incoming attack, hopping to my feet and taking a defensive crouch.

When Ulnyx had fought, it was with pure brute power and rage, with a large measure of experience thrown in. The technique was all his own, all chaos and anger. Alyx had said Espanto trained her to be a bodyguard, and an assassin. She had the power of a Great Were. She had the form of a dancer.

It was an incredible thing to watch something that large move with such fluid efficiency. I had felt fortunate when I thought I had stolen her from Espanto, and could force her into the fight. Seeing her now, I wondered about the balance. It wasn't just about Heaven and Hell and Earth. The balance was in everything. It was everywhere, from this universe, to all universes.

Had it thrown me a bone?

She did a neat pirouette, catching one of the angels in her claw and using the momentum to throw him into the HVAC unit behind her, at the same time she swiveled down, deflected a sword stroke with her thick hide, and ran her claws through the breastplate like it was butter. She knocked a third seraph down and dove in, ripping her throat out with her massive jaws.

I was elated and crying at the same time, thankful to be winning the fight, horrified to be doing this to the angels. What would Josette have thought of me for this?

She would have told me to follow the path that God set out for me, even if it seemed contrary to His will. Even if I couldn't possibly understand how it was what He intended.

I deflected another sword, turned and sank the spatha into angel

flesh. Another replaced him, her brown dreadlocks swinging wildly as she made a clumsy attack. I pushed it aside and cut off her head, feeling the wetness on my cheeks as she fell.

These weren't experienced soldiers, I realized. They were trying to slow us down. To keep us out of the building. There was no sign of any Fists, no sign of Adam. Did they even know where he was? The whole thing suddenly reeked of desperation.

There was a stairwell near the center of the rooftop. It was where the Touched must have exited from. The door was open. A round, silver, scripture covered ball was rolling towards us.

There were still angels on the rooftop. If the explosion tore them apart, they wouldn't be able to heal. Did they know the sacrifice they were about to make, or had it been made for them?

I threw my power out, launching myself towards Alyx. I was nowhere near strong or massive enough to move her, but I did get my arms around her neck. I threw out my energy again, at the same time the bomb exploded.

My wall of power blocked the shrapnel and heat. It caught the blast and we were battered backwards, thrown away from the explosion. The remaining angels were bathed in the fire, and the Holy Light, and as the force knocked us from the rooftop, I could see that while the fire was burning them, the Light was healing them.

That was my trick.

We tumbled in the air, my arms wrapped tight around Alyx's neck. She wrapped herself around me, huge muscled arms putting me in a protective shell. We hit the ground hard, or at least she did, landing on her back and absorbing the blow. The drop would have killed a human. She opened her arms and let me get to my feet, and then flipped herself over, sitting on her haunches next to me.

There were only a few angels left on the rooftop, and they must have been stunned, because they didn't follow.

"Inside," I said, pointing to the glass front of the building. She scooped me up again and leaped forward, turning her shoulder into the doors and smashing through the hardened glass as though it were paper. It shattered inward, leaving us in a large, open foyer with monitors on every wall. They were all playing the same clip about how Taylor Heavy Industries was making the world a better place through technology.

A better place for who?

There was a smaller door behind the reception area, and hallways that branched to either side. I could hear gunfire echoing from somewhere further in.

Alyx put me down and shifted back to human form. She motioned towards the door. “The human is this way.”

We went through the door, through a space with some offices, a conference room, and a lunchroom, through the back and out onto the factory floor.

The room was huge. Conveyor belts sat still on massive machines that climbed up towards the roof, various gears and belts and robotic arms positioned at different intervals along the track. There were buckets of parts, monitoring stations, forklifts and packaging materials. A catwalk ran above it all, for easier visual checking.

I hadn’t been in too many factories. I imagined that most of them probably looked similar to this. I couldn’t tell what they were actually producing here, but I figured it probably wasn’t Fists of God. If it was, they would have thousands of them by now.

The area was clear. There were no Touched guards hiding in the cracks and crevices along the assembly line, and the angels still hadn’t followed us inside. I had been out of their sight long enough for them to forget about me, but they should have been able to guess something was up by the condition of the rooftop. Had they counted their dead and given up?

The gunfire had also stopped, so I wasn’t sure where we should go. I pulled out my phone, ready to text Rose and get her position. No signal. If it hadn’t been for Alyx, I might have spent hours trying to find them.

“This way, Master,” she said. The size of the machinery had forced her back to human form to maneuver through smaller chasms.

“Do you sense any other Divine?” I asked.

“No. I smell others. They could be behind scripture.”

“Thanks for breaking my fall.” I could have stopped myself. I couldn’t have caught her too.

She looked back at me, her eyes big and soft again. “Of course.”

We navigated past the line, each passing second giving me more cause to worry. Were the angels regrouping? Was Adam on the way? Was Rose okay? I still didn’t trust Gervais, and I hated having to send her off with him. His special talent was the only way for

them to get in without drawing fire, though it had sounded like they hadn't gotten completely through the defense.

We reached the other end of the floor, almost half a mile away from where we'd started. Each step was making me more worried.

"Dead end," I said. The back of the building was a solid wall, with some small windows way up near the rooftop.

Alyx didn't answer. I turned back and saw her eyes were closed, her nose shifting and rocking. She stepped forward without looking, kneeling down at the wall and putting her hand to the floor. I followed with my eyes. There was nothing there, the joint between floor and wall was solid.

"Through here," she said.

"Where?"

"The whole wall. It is a glamour. A strong glamour. There is air coming out here. It's carrying their scent."

A glamour? I was highly resistant to Divine trickery. It would take a very, very powerful angel to place a glamour that could trip me up. I put my hand to the wall. It felt real enough. I slid it down to the floor where Alyx was pointing, closing my eyes and pushing my own power out. It helped me to find the seam.

I opened my eyes. Locating the beginning of the glamour allowed me to overcome the power, to see completely through it. Most of the wall was real, though it didn't have any windows and was clearly not the end of the building. In front of me was a massive elevator.

I found the button and hit it. The doors slid open. It was a freight elevator. A gigantic freight elevator, large enough to carry an entire semi if needed. It had a matching door on the other side, which I could only guess led to some route to the outside. I was sure this was how they were bringing the materials in. Maybe sending them back out, too. Scripture ran all along the ceiling, tiny lettering scratched into the metal, and glowing a soft blue that illuminated the space.

"I guess we go down," I said, stepping over the threshold.

Alyx followed behind me, crying out when she crossed over.

I whipped around to see what was happening. Her entire body was beginning to steam, the smell of frankincense growing more heavy with each second. She stood paralyzed in fear and pain.

I picked her up and carried her out. The steaming stopped at once, and I watched the burns on her skin begin to heal.

“You’ll have to stay up here.”

She shook her head. “You need me.”

“I do. Up here. If anything tries to get in… don’t let them.”

She wasn’t happy about it. Neither was I. “As you command, Master,” she said at last. “Nothing will get past me.”

I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, and then went back into the elevator. I hit the button and waved to Alyx as the doors closed and I began to drop.

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It took almost five minutes for the massive lift to settle at its base. I spent the entire time pacing the length, worrying about Alyx above and Rose below, worrying about Adam making an appearance, worrying about Gervais doing something stupid. I wanted allies, I wanted help. I wasn't sure I wanted the emotional roller coaster that was coming along with it.

The doors opened quietly, all things considered. They revealed a small loading dock, with a platform to carry stuff out onto the trailers, and wide twin doors behind it. There was nobody here, and the dock was empty. The smell of gasoline and oil lingered, and I was amazed that Alyx could pick out Rose's scent through it.

I wasn't going to go in softly. I vaulted forward and slammed the doors open with my power, bursting through ready to rip the place apart.

Everything was quiet. In front of me was a new assembly line, one made up of more machines, bigger and more complex then the first set. It reminded me of videos I had seen of automotive plants, though it seemed a bit less automated. There were stations spread

around the floor, where it looked like some of the work could be done by hand, or where someone helped guide the system through its maneuvers.

The station closest to me was a tall rack, a crossbeam with a pair of hooks mounted on it, inside a gyroscopic type setup. Attached to the three swiveling arms were small appendages that looked like pens, with the smallest little hole in the center. I didn't need to be a scientist to guess what they were. Lasers. Etching lasers, able to burn the tiniest scripture into the metal suits that would be hanging from the hooks. There were no Fists in production at the moment. Looking around again, there was nobody here.

Where the hell had Rose and Gervais gone? Where had the gunfire come from? Hadn't anyone been down here?

I moved more slowly through the room, checking around the machinery, past computers that had gone dark, into every crevice and space I could find, looking for anything that might give me a clue. I kept expecting to stumble over a body. Rose's, a Touched. Despite myself, I kept hoping to find evidence of a dead angel, a hint of ash and dust to prove that something had happened down here. I just didn't understand how it could all be so clean.

I was losing hope in a hurry, my heart sinking to my gut like a stone. Rose and Gervais were gone. Matthias was gone. Had the demon double-crossed me? Had he somehow overcome the strength of the binding we had made? I didn't think it could be possible, and yet there was nothing else to explain it.

I turned back towards the doors, towards the elevator.

I heard a small beep.

It was the slightest sound, coming from one of the machines. I walked over to it, searching with my eyes. I wasn't sure exactly where the noise had come from. It was hard to track such a slight intonation.

The beep came again.

My eyes darted to a short belt that traveled through some kind of square box. I ran over to it, leaning in on the belt and peering into the box.

Rose's phone was resting in the center, the LED on the top a solid red. I pulled it out with my power, bringing it to my hand and turning the screen on.

It beeped again.

Low battery?

I stared at it. Why would the battery be low? What could drain it that fast? It wasn't an expensive phone, and we didn't have time to charge it all the way. Even so, we barely used it, and I doubted Rose was playing Candy Crush in the middle of our assault.

I navigated into the menu, and went to the photos. There was one. A video. I checked the battery. Five percent. I hit play and tracked to the end.

Rose had turned it around so it was recording her face. She was sweaty and scared, a bit of blood on her scalp. "…Bad timing. She's coming for me. I think they got Gervais already. Not Adam, another angel. Her aura is so bright, its blinding. Shit, she's coming."

The video stopped there. She must have turned off the phone and tossed it to keep it from being discovered. At least now I knew what happened to them. We came for Matthias, and they took her and possibly Gervais instead. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm myself. The angels wouldn't kill them if they surrendered. They might try to use them as leverage. They might just hold them until they won and then let them go. More likely, they would force them to Confess, to find out what they knew. There was nothing there that they could use to help them, but I had seen with Josette how traumatizing the process could be.

I was going to go back to the elevator, when I realized that there was no way Rose and Gervais had taken that route. It was too slow and too loud to go unnoticed. There had to be another route.

I pushed my power out towards the walls, knowing what to look for now. I found the glamoured door easily, and I shoved it open. A spiral staircase led upwards, each metal rung of the ladder inscribed with scripture similar to the stuff in the elevator. More protection against demons. Gervais had gotten past it, which meant Lucifer had cooked up a demon that could even fool the Heavenly power. If not for the imminent threat from the Fists, that thought might have been even more chilling.

I hopped the steps four at a time, getting to the surface in less than a minute. It opened up on what I imagined was the other side of the elevator, where the trucks would roll out. It was the rear of the building, where Rose and Gervais had probably come in. How had they gotten past the glamour?

I went to the elevator and forced the doors apart, first on the near side, and then on the far. Alyx was waiting on the other side. She turned and waved at me, her eyes bright.

“We need to get out of here,” I said. “Meet me outside.”
A heavy thump behind me shook the ground.
Another one followed it.

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Alyx didn't wait to meet me outside. She shifted into her monster form, taking two steps back and charging forward, leaping the fifty foot chasm between us. The distance was easy. The scripture made it painful.

She landed right behind me, her skin sizzling and hissing, blood running from the wounds. She fell to her stomach, whining in pain, waiting to heal.

The bay doors twisted inward as the Fists charged through it, blades out, bolts reloaded. "Bad timing," Rose had said in the video.

I couldn't agree more.

The bay was empty, leaving nothing to distract or displace the armors with. They charged towards me in perfect sync, not wasting their bolts again, not leaving them open to be returned. I found the stone in my pocket and called on the spatha, glancing behind me at Alyx. She was struggling to get to her feet, the wounds healing slowly, but healing.

I threw the blade at the Fist on the left, letting it deflect it with its own, throwing out my power and catching it, pulling it back in

behind the thing. It wasn't expecting the attack, and the blessed edge dug into its shoulder. It slowed and turned towards the blade, even as I pushed it back out and whipped it in, an invisible swordsman keeping one of them occupied. It took a lot of concentration for me to keep it going and get back to Alyx, wrapping my arm around her neck even as the second Fist bore down on us.

"Alyx, you need to get up. We need to get out of here." In her Great Were form she was bigger and faster than a horse.

Her eyes found me, and she growled and forced herself up, letting me hang onto her back while she gained her footing. The second Fist was a dozen feet away.

"I'll push it back, hit it hard and it should fall."

"Yes, Master," she said, bunching and springing towards it.

I pulled my energy back, the spatha with it, catching the sword in my hand and then throwing the power back out. It slammed into the Fist, slowing its forward momentum, getting its weight off balance. Alyx pounced at it, both fore and hind legs bunching and slamming it hard in the chest. Her claws skidded off with the sparkling of blue light, but the force remained. It started to fall backwards beneath the weight, and as it did she pushed off it, getting even more forward momentum.

The ground shook when the Fist hit the floor. The second one angled our way and took a chance with the bolts. I cast the power out and caught them, redirecting them over and down, into the fallen Fist. The missiles pierced its arms and legs, nailing it into the floor.

Then we were out of the bay, out into the evening sky, charging ahead.

"Stop," I said. "Stop!"

Alyx hit the brakes, her feet digging into the ground. I held on tight, trying not to get thrown by the maneuver.

Adam was standing in front of us.

"Landon," he said with a smile. There was no hint that he had ever been buried under tons of earth.

I turned my head back, looking for the Fists.

"They won't come. Not yet," he said. His metal hand was quiet. "I was hoping we could negotiate."

"Negotiate on what?" I asked. The pause gave me a moment to consider how I must look, perched on top of the Were, dark sword

in hand. Heroic, or stupid?

"I have your human companions. Rose, and Peter, they said their names were."

"And?"

"We can stop this now. I know you've felt what the Fists can do. That was two of them. We have a dozen now, and there will be more once we can get the resources. You don't need to fight. Repent, and we'll let them go. No, even better. Repent, ask them to repent, and you'll all be afforded a place in Heaven. Even this one." He motioned to Alyx.

"This again?" I asked. Alyx growled in agreement.

"Come on, Landon. You know you can't fight them. Only two, and you ran away. It was smart to think they would protect me, it bought you time. Not enough time. You know how much I respect you, admire you. I'm trying to save you. You can't beat two, what are you going to do against twelve?"

"I'm going to do what I've always done," I said. "Keep trying. Keep fighting. I'm not afraid to die. I don't want to die a coward. I made a promise."

"I know. They want you dead, my friend. They want you gone. You know I'm only doing as My Lord commands."

"I know you're doing what you think you should. You can keep Rose and Peter. We'll settle this soon enough."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Landon. We'll settle this now." His wings spread wide, and he rocketed into the air, getting way out of my range.

"Alyx, go," I said, twisting around. The Fists appeared in the broken doorway of the factory. He'd stalled me long enough for one to get the other loose.

She growled her assent and launched forward again, covering the ground with incredible speed. I heard the thumping of the Fists behind us, breaking into a full run that allowed them to keep the pace. Like before, Alyx would tire eventually. The Fists wouldn't.

"Head back into the city," I said. "We need to lose them."

She turned and found the road, leaping a small berm and landing smoothly on the pavement, her claws leaving marks each time they hit the ground. The Fists followed behind, and I watched the sky, watched the aura of the First Inquisitor from two miles away. He was commanding them, that much I was sure of. Yet it was still only the two, and he said they had twelve. Did they need

more angels to control the rest? Or were they assigned to other tasks? It wasn't like they needed more than two.

We hit the city proper, Alyx charging into traffic, leaping over and around cars that slowed and swerved without even knowing what they were slowing and swerving for. The Fists continued behind, though they were hampered by the human density, forced to trim their pace to avoid hurting anyone. Even if the people wanted to get out of the way, to avoid the Divine among them, they couldn't always do it. It was the obstacle we needed.

"That way," I said, aiming Alyx down a narrow alley.

There were all kinds of fruit stands and shoppers here, and we recreated movie cliche history, barreling through them and knocking everything aside, coming out the other end and racing across the next.

We nearly speeded headlong into one of the Fists.

"North," I yelled, holding on as Alyx planted her feet to turn.

I threw my power out between us and the Fist, catching the bolts it launched, at the same time she surged forward again. I was so used to being disguised, I had forgotten about Alyx's hot demonic aura. Her power was a blinding red beacon they could hone right in on. We needed to cover it up somehow.

We raced down the street. I could hear the Fists running behind us, falling back as we pushed through the mortal traffic. I winced when Alyx's foot came down on the roof of a car, causing her to slip and regain herself, sending the vehicle off into another, the driver surely wounded. Even so, I didn't ask her to slow. Not until we got further away.

"We need to go in there," I said, pointing at a tall, residential apartment building. She gave me a confused grunt, but made the adjustments to get us going that way. I vaulted from her back when we neared the revolving doors, and she shifted and came to a standing stop next to me.

"What are we doing?" she asked.

"He can follow your aura. We need to hide it."

"How?"

The aura was like a Divine radio signal. I'd learned to mess with it, to disguise it a long time ago. If we got close enough, I was hoping I could cover it over like a blanket, or deflect it like a piece of tin foil. If we could stay undiscovered long enough, Adam would forget about me, forget about us.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her into the building. The Fists were coming hard, but it would be a challenge for them to get into the small space without hurting anyone. They weren't made to fight in close quarters. That didn't mean Adam wouldn't send others in to try to draw us out.

We walked through the lobby, past the other people who were milling about on their way to here or there. We headed right to the elevator, crowding into the first one that opened heading upwards.

"Where are we going?" she asked again.

"Home," I replied.

"I don't understand."

"Trust me."

She smiled. "Yes, M-"

I put a finger to her lips. I didn't want her calling me that at all. I wasn't going to let her in public.

We got out on the seventeenth floor.

"Find us an empty one," I said. "Fast."

Alyx started running down the hallway, while I kept my eyes on the windows at either end of the corridor, waiting for angels to come bursting in. Would Adam send them, or would he wait me out? We both knew I couldn't hide in here forever.

"This one," Alyx said, facing us towards a door.

I reached out and unlocked it, shoving it open, pulling her in, and slamming it closed, almost at the same time the glass outside shattered. At least I had my answer.

I threw her down on a leather couch and brought myself down on top of her, putting my arms around her and holding her as tight as I could. I closed my eyes and focused on my energy, sending it out around me, running it around my limbs and connecting the spaces in between, acting like the tin foil I'd conceived. Would this work? I thought it would. I wasn't sure.

I felt Alyx's hands tighten around me, her breath against my neck, and then the wet softness of her lips against my flesh. She kissed my neck, pushing herself into me suggestively.

"Alyx," I whispered.

"Mmm… yes, Master?"

"This isn't what I had in mind." I kept my eyes closed, listening for the approach of the angels. I counted the seconds down. Thirty seconds to forget, thirty seconds more for good measure.

"You don't want your mate?" she asked.

Again her naiveté was forcing my hand. “I do. Just… not right now.”

She kissed my cheek and pressed her face against mine. “They’re right outside the door,” she whispered.

I held my breath, waiting for them to open it. If they saw me, this game would be over.

“I never had this much fun with Espanto,” she said, her breath hot against me. “He never let me go anywhere unless it was to kill something. I love you.”

Did I hear that right? “What?”

“I love you.”

I squeezed my eyes tighter. This wasn’t happening. “Where are the angels?” The thirty seconds had come and gone. I wanted to be sure they had left.

She didn’t answer right away.

“Alyx?”

“Do you love me?” she asked.

“Where are the angels?”

Silence.

“Alyx,” I said, doing my best imitation of a snarl. “Tell me where they are, now.”

She nuzzled her face against mine. “Gone, Master.”

I gave myself permission to breathe, and let her go.

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“Alyx, I know that things are different for weres, and you don’t have a lot of experience of the world outside of your pack and Espanto. I don’t know you anywhere near well enough to love you.”

We were still sitting on the couch. I don’t know why I was even having the conversation. For some reason, I felt like I owed it to her after she helped me get away from the Fists.

“What is wrong with the way of the pack?” she asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with it, if you’re a werewolf. I’m not a werewolf.”

“You’re the diuscrucis. You’re strong and powerful. You were also the alpha. You freed me from Espanto. You trusted me with your life. I love you.”

She said it firmly, convinced that it was true. Maybe it was for her. She was a demon, and power was their most desired quality. It didn’t help that she felt like she was supposed to be, deserved to be mated to her pack’s alpha. Ulnyx was gone. Lylyx was gone. The pack was scattered and in ruins. Why not?

“Okay, say that you do. I loved someone before. I know what it

feels like. I don't want to hurt your feelings. I don't feel that for you. We only met a few hours ago." I really didn't want to hurt her feelings. I needed her power.

She was quiet. She put her head down, thinking. Then she looked at me. "Do you think you will ever love me?"

"I don't know. It takes time to find out if you can love someone or not."

"Would you not love me because I'm a demon?"

Izak was a demon. He had once been as evil as it came. Love had changed him. "No."

"Then why do you think you wouldn't love me?"

I wasn't sure what to say. Truth be told, I already had a bit of a soft spot for her. Maybe it was the way she nuzzled my neck, or the fact that she could bowl over a Fist of God. There was something cute about her innocent exuberance and demeanor, and I felt guilty that I could probably get used to, and grow endeared to, the way she called me 'Master'. At the same time, she was so inexperienced with the outside world. In some ways she wasn't much more than a child. It was hard to see past that part.

Then there was Rose.

Did I have to get all confused and emo about every girl I met?

"I'm not saying I never will or won't. I'm saying I don't know. I need to spend more time with you."

She smiled and leaned over, putting her head on my shoulder. "Okay."

I took another deep breath and reached for my phone.

"What are you doing?" Alyx asked.

"Phoning a friend. We need to find out where they took Rose and Gervais."

She tilted her head, confused. "I thought you said the angels could keep them?"

"I know what Confession does to angels. I can't imagine what it will do to a mortal. Also, wherever they took them… I bet that's where they took Matthias, too."

I found Alichino in the contact list and made the call.

"What is it?" the demon asked.

"The angels have Rose. I need to know where they took her."

"Landon? I haven't heard from you in two years, and what, you don't even say hello? Seriously. It's like you were raised by wolves."

That comment got a positive response from Alyx, who pushed

her head harder against my shoulder.

"Alichino, shut up. She was taken by an angel, she said its aura was blinding. Also, I think they're moving the armors from the factory to another location."

I heard mumbling on the other end of the phone, and then some thumping and static.

"Signore," Dante said.

"Dante. Did you hear what I told Allie?"

"Yes. You said another location?"

"Yeah."

"It makes sense. The scripture on the metal is useless on its own. It requires an angel to give it Divine power and activate it. I have been traveling back and forth in order to help Alichino work out the requirements, based on our observations of the scripture. We haven't got it calculated yet, but it is quite a lot. More than a single angel can provide."

I knew what he was getting at. "A sanctuary."

"Yes. To power the scripture on the Fist, they would need to bring it to a sanctuary and bathe it in the light of Heaven."

"Okay, but they aren't flying them out. They had a loading bay, a whole setup to drive them."

"They likely can't carry them until they are activated. Ordinary metal is quite heavy, even for a seraph."

"So wherever they're going, it needs to be nearby. Where's the closest angel sanctuary."

"I'm not aware of one in Shenzhen," Dante said. "I don't know all of their locations. They don't like to advertise, for obvious reasons."

"They would need a road," Alichino said, his voice muffled by his distance to the phone. "One that could bear the weight. I'll get on that."

"Ah, yes. The demon is correct. The Fists are very heavy. They must have added or reinforced a road. Please, signore, allow us a little time. We will discover the location."

Time was the last thing we had. There wasn't much choice.

"Okay. Wait! The angel."

"What about it?" Dante asked.

"Rose said its aura was blinding. I've been face to face with some powerful angels before. I never felt anything like that."

There was silence on the other end of the line. It wasn't a good

sign.

"Dante?"

I heard him take a heaving breath. "I am hoping that it is not what I think it may be, signore."

"Just spit it out."

"It is possible that there may be an archangel involved."

I froze on the couch, feeling like my jaw was resting on the carpet. "Oh. Shit. I thought that was against the rules?"

"It normally is. If Lucifer knew about this, Hell would have already come to Earth. They must be moving about in secrecy."

"What if Heavenly light wasn't enough?" I said, the thought springing to the front of my mind.

"Excuse me, signore?"

"What if Heavenly light wasn't enough? The Fists, the bombs, the Holy flame, even the crazy powerful scripture we ran into in the factory? This kind of evolution doesn't just happen. What if the archangel is giving some of his own power over to make all this stuff work?"

There was another pause.

"Then you best put a stop to it," Dante said.

I hung up without saying goodbye, feeling my body shaking from the implications. It was getting worse with every minute that swung by.

"Is it time to run?" Alyx asked.

"Not yet." I hit another name on my phone. The odds were fifty-fifty that she would answer.

It rang three times before she picked up. "Landon?" She sounded surprised. Considering I'd never called her before, it made sense.

"Elyse. Hey. Where are you?" I tried to be a little more polite than I had with Alichino.

"Cape Town. What's up?"

"How fast can you get to Shenzhen, China?"

"Not fast. It's probably about a twenty hour flight."

I tried to hide my disappointment. I was desperate for a little more backup. "You don't happen to have any quicker routes, do you?"

She laughed. "I take it you're in trouble?"

"We're all in trouble. It's a long story, but the bottom line is that the angels are kicking demon, and my, ass."

"I only have three rift stones. And retrieving one of them was

the whole reason I came here."

"Do they do what I think they do?"

"Yes."

"There's a rift in Kowloon, about an hour drive from here. This is important enough to burn a stone on."

She didn't hesitate. She was a former Nicht Creidem. She knew the score. "I'll call you when I get to Shenzhen."

"Thanks, Elle. Oh, and watch out for weres when you come through."

"Got it. Thanks for the warning."

"Write this all down, so you don't forget." I could prevent people from forgetting me when I was near them. Phone calls? Not so much. Elyse was used to the small complication, and she retained the memory of when we had first coordinated the system.

"I'm already doing it. See you soon."

She hung up on me.

"Who is she?" Alyx asked. There as a slight hint of jealousy in her voice.

"A friend. She's going to help us."

"So what do we do now?"

"There's nothing to do but wait."

She smiled mischievously. "I can think of something else to do."

I wondered how many men would turn down two offers in one day. Or how many men would even turn down one offer in one day. At least I wouldn't have to worry about that with Elyse.

"Do you remember what I said about not knowing you very well?"

"Yes, Master." She blinked her big eyes, her mouth open and inviting. I could smell a change in her, that reminded me of Gervais and his pheromones. It probably worked great on other weres.

"Yeah. So… let's try to wait until I know you better and the mortal world isn't threatening to fall apart in the next twenty-four hours."

"As you command, Master." She backed away from me a couple of feet and made a face that left me feeling guilty for turning her down. It was intentional, manipulative. Despite her inexperience with people, she was still a demon.

I leaned back on the couch and closed my eyes, trying to take a minute to relax and recharge. I managed a couple of deep breaths before my gut wrenched again, the tickling pain causing me to

groan.

“Landon?” Alyx said. She slid over, putting her arms around me. “What is it?”

The balance. Again. Adam wasn’t about to let me slow him down.

He was moving forward with the angels’ plan.

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Whatever he was doing, it was big enough to keep me unsettled the entire time we were waiting for Elyse. I leaned against the arm of the couch, feeling more desperate and more angry with each twist of my soul, with each shift of the needle. It would take the death of a lot of demons to throw the balance altogether. Weeks at the current pace.

Who knew if the current pace would last?

My phone rang.

"Elyse. Where are you?"

"I'm here. Shenzhen. Where are you?"

"Somewhere downtown. A big apartment building. I'm not sure what the address is. Just look for the bright hot aura of a Great Were."

"You're kidding."

"Not this time. I'm getting too desperate to kid."

"Okay. I'll be there in fifteen."

She ditched me again.

Alyx was laying across the couch, her eyes closed. She was

snoring lightly, her mouth hanging open. She looked peaceful, content. I was sure she didn't understand the gravity of the situation. I wasn't pretty sure she wouldn't care, even if she did.

I watched her stomach rise and fall with her breath, watched her nose twitch, watched her hands and feet shake a little. What did weres dream about?

I didn't realize I was staring for so long, until her eyes snapped open. She didn't say anything to me, or pay me any mind. Instead, she hopped up onto her hands and feet, her eyes on the door. She was ready to pounce.

Someone knocked a few seconds later.

"Human," Alyx said. "A strange smell. Different."

"It's okay. It's Elyse. You can stand down."

She finally looked at me, her face violent and serious. It softened, and she smiled. "I saw you watching me." She fell backwards, putting her back against the arm of the sofa and pulling her knees up to her chest.

Of course she did. I could only guess what she thought about it. I reached out with my power and pulled the door open.

It was easy for me to forget sometimes how young Elyse actually was. She had the wisdom of years drilled into her by her father from the time she was born, and that kind of upbringing had brought her to carry herself with a confidence that was more akin to a two hundred year old angel than a twenty four year old mortal.

She was some part German, some part Japanese. Pale skin, almond eyes, short and lithe in a leather jacket and tight blue jeans. She had a dozen necklaces around her neck, rings on every finger, earrings, a nose ring, and I knew that underneath the clothing her entire body was tattooed and scarred in scripture and rune, an artistic mutilation to give her maximum protection against the Divine, protection that I hoped she would be able to pass on to Rose once she had time.

She wore a black do-rag over her scalp, hiding the mess of a scar her father had added to her forehead, and the bald head that refused to grow hair since the day he had done it.

She smiled when she saw me. "Landon. You still have my sword, right?"

I pulled the stone from my pocket and tossed it to her. "Of course. It wasn't worth having to deal with your wrath to risk losing it."

She caught the rock and walked over to me, reaching up so I could give her a massive hug. “It’s been too long,” she said.

After the Beast, after I’d finished mourning, I had sought Elyse out. She had made a lot of sacrifices to help me, and the loss of her father and the shunning by her family had left her pretty much alone. In a lot of ways, we were in a similar place at the time, and while I never talked to her about Charis and Clara, and all the crap that had spilled out to Rose, we had talked about a lot of other things. Mainly, about Heaven and Hell, good and evil, my place in the universe, and hers. It had taken a few weeks, but I won her over in the end.

Now, she was more like a sister to me. Closer than Obi in some ways, and not in others. Putting my arms around her, holding her close, feeling her warmth against me… only then did I realize how isolated I had become. Maybe I would live forever, but she wouldn’t. Obi wouldn’t.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so out of touch,” I said, breaking the embrace. “I guess it’s taken the threat of the Rapture to get me out of my funk.”

“Apology accepted.” She turned to Alyx. “Who’s your friend?”

“Alyx, meet Elyse. Elyse, Alyx.”

“Cool to meet you,” Elyse said, holding out her hand.

Alyx sat on the couch, staring at it. Then she looked at me.

“Remember what I said about Rose? Same deal.”

She looked uncomfortable, getting up and reaching out to take Elyse’s hand. We would need to work on that.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, quiet and meek. A quick shake, and she retreated to her spot. Elyse glanced over at me, confused.

“It’s a long story,” I said. “I have a different one for you first. You want something to drink? This isn’t my place, but I’m sure they have water.”

“No. Just let me sit for a few minutes. The demon I dragged through the rift clocked me pretty good when we got to the other side. My head is still spinning a little bit.”

“I’m sure you gave better than you got.”

“Of course.”

She sat down on the couch, opposite Alyx. I could tell the Were was doing her best to not look like she was put out by the presence of a human.

I spent the next twenty minutes going over everything that had

happened, from the moment Rose had shot me, which drew a nice laugh, to the conversation I had with Dante and Alichino. After that, I pulled out Rose's phone and used the last one percent of the battery to show her the video.

"That's your new friend?" she asked. "She's cute."

"She's sweaty and has blood on her face."

"Nothing that a shower wouldn't fix. I like her eyes."

"If we get her back alive I'll be sure to introduce you. She wants to fight, but she's out there naked right now."

"There are worse things-"

"Elle, can you be serious for a minute? She needs some trinkets, some tats, that kind of thing. I was going to talk to you about all this when it was over. I know you understand why I called you now instead."

She nodded. "This is what we talked about, isn't it? New recruits? If we survive this, and she's willing, I can start getting her ready. She doesn't have the Nicht Creidem bloodline, though. I don't know if she'll do what it takes to make this stuff work."

It took a small measure of Divine power for the runes and scripture to activate. The Nicht Creidem had been passing what they had amongst themselves via inbreeding for thousands of years. If Rose wanted it, she would have to drink angel and demon blood.

"We'll worry about that if we get to it."

"Right. I know you said this was important, but I wasn't exactly expecting to have to attack an angel sanctuary with an *archangel* inside it."

"Good, because attacking it would be stupid. We need to sneak in."

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My phone rang again ten minutes later.

“Signore,” Dante said. “I don’t quite remember what we talked about, but I wrote a note to find an angelic sanctuary with new road construction to it, and to call you when I did.”

“Do you have it?” I asked.

“Here, let me give the phone to Alichino.”

The phone passed hands.

“Landon. It’s been a long time. How are you?”

“I’ll be better once you give me the location of the sanctuary.”

He cackled and hissed. “Yeah. You always need something. No ‘hello’. No pleasantries. It’s like you were raised by wolves or something.” I didn’t know if he was just messing with me. They had the note, so he had to know we had talked already. He cackled a little more. “Yeah, so I went digging through permit applications and construction receipts. It was a pain in the ass because its all in Chinese, but you know, I’m good like that. Anyway, the place is called Ming Shan monastery. It’s a really secluded place, a patch of private land sitting in the corner of a Chinese national park.

Somehow, they got a permit to build a heavy road through the public trees and grass to connect it to the rest of the world. All of a sudden. After three thousand years."

That had to be the place. "Do you have any kind of intel about the site? Satellite images? Photos? Anything?"

"Nope. I asked Google. I asked Bing. I even asked freaking Jeeves. The place barely exists. Three thousand years."

"What about private satellites?"

"I tried the Pentagon, Chinese National Security, and the NSA. The NSA had some interesting stuff, but no satellite imagery." He cackled into the phone again.

I figured as much. "I don't suppose the monastery is owned by Taylor Enterprises?"

"Bingo, buddy. The permit application was signed by one Adam Taylor, C-E-O."

Adam Taylor? I'd never heard of him, but the shared first name with a certain cyborg seraph didn't skip my attention. "Text me the GPS coordinates."

"Doing it now. Here, I'm going to put Dante back on. Nice talking to you, D."

"Whoa, hang on. You have anything new on the head?"

"Oh, yeah. I totally forgot in all the excitement of reading thousands of lines of Chinese. Dante helped me with some more of the scripture on the inside, and it didn't make a lot of sense until we wrote down 'archangel' after I guess you talked to us last. The scripture is nothing that's been used in this realm before. It has some similarities though. The nearest we can figure, its some kind of force field or something."

"You mean like a wall, so demons can't get through even if they pierce the outer scripture?"

"Yeah, kind of. Except, it only works from the inside out."

That was strange. Very strange. I heard the phone shift users again.

"Signore. I hope we have been some help to you."

"You've been a lot of help. Thanks, Dante."

"Landon, before you go, I… I know things have been a bit strained between us. I want to apologize to you. So many things have happened, and it is my fault. Since the day I listened to Mr. Ross and brought you back to this world… none of it has gone the way I planned."

I wasn't sure why he was apologizing now. Was he sure I was going to fail? "Okay."

"I feel responsible for this, for you. Especially now that I am struggling to find my own balance, and recover what I lost. I just wanted you to know that I am sorry. If you need anything else, please consider me your humble servant."

I was quiet for a few breaths. It was hard for me to see the poet as a humble servant. Still, his apology was sincere. "Don't worry about it," I said at last.

I hung up before he could say anything else.

A few seconds later, the latitude and longitude of Ming Shan monastery popped up on my phone. I plugged it in and watched the dot settle on the map.

"I guess we're going in blind," I said, turning to Elyse.

"I guess we are."

Alyx got up off the couch and moved to my side.

"What is your command, Master?"

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The biggest problem with angel sanctuaries wasn't that they were filled with angels, because in all likelihood, it wasn't. Normally, they were manned by Touched monks and a small contingent of more elder seraphs, whose job was to guard the Heavenly Light, its primary purpose being used as what amounted to an elevator between Earth and Heaven. While more experienced angels didn't need it, the younger ones used the Light to help guide them between the worlds, meaning reinforcements were only seconds away. The Light had other properties too. It could heal the seraph, it could be used to force Confession, or apparently it could be used to power robots.

Worse, the altar that focused the Heavenly Light was behind heavily protected doors that could be sealed from the inside. I had stopped a demon attack on a sanctuary once. Now I needed to organize my own.

Not really an attack. What we needed was more like a Mission Impossible style break-in, an inception that would allow us to get in, find Rose and Gervais, find Matthias Zheng, avoid the archangel,

and get the hell out. Once that was done, I would still need to do something about Adam and the Fists before they managed to tip the balance, and I was pinning a lot of hope on the idea that Zheng would tell me their weakness, either intentionally, or through less… polite… means.

We stole a cab to make the first leg of the journey, from downtown Shenzhen to the side of the single road that split the Plover Cove national park in two. It was a twenty mile hike from that position to the monastery, and we could have gotten much closer - even driven right up to the gates - if we weren't trying to keep Alyx out of the angels' attention until we needed to call on her. That, and driving to the gates was a little less sneaky than what I had in mind.

She wasn't happy when I told her she wouldn't be going in with Elyse and me. She protested the decision with a fierce and almost violent anger. Not because she was eager to kill angels, but because she felt an insanely powerful and irrational need to protect me. Knowing I was walking into danger and not being able to do anything about it caused her to curse, whine, tear up the apartment we had borrowed, and otherwise throw a fit worthy of a two year old. Elyse had watched the whole thing with an odd mix of amusement and fascination. I had gotten angry, and thrown Alyx to the ground, standing over her and barking orders.

I found that she wasn't the delicate flower she looked like, or that I had feared her to be, in her human form. She didn't skulk or pout or otherwise shrink up. She beamed at my dominance, and I realized I had only dug that hole even deeper.

"You know what to do," I said to her. We were in the middle of the forest surrounding the sanctuary, about half of a mile from the road we had discovered, a road that Alyx said still smelled of gasoline, rubber, and exhaust.

"Yes, Master. I will wait for your signal."

"Elyse?"

"I'm ready," she said. I had let her keep the spatha. It was hers anyway. She had given me a pair of nasty looking daggers in return. Normally it took time for a cursed edge to spread the wound through an angel, giving them a chance to heal themselves with holy water. According to Elyse, this particular cursed weapon would kill in seconds. I wasn't sure why she wanted to trade.

"Nervous?" I asked.

She smiled. “Very. This is what we’re here for.” She leaned in and gave me a short hug. “We can do this.”

“Master? Might I wish you good hunting?”

There was no point in complicating things. I stepped towards Alyx, letting her wrap her arms around me, and lowering my head so she could kiss me.

“Don’t let them catch you,” I said. “No matter what happens. That’s a command.”

“Of course.”

We left Alyx standing there, making our way through the trees and brush, covering the ground at a solid run. It was a long distance for Elyse, but she was so well-conditioned that she never slowed.

Ten miles.

We covered it in an hour.

We slowed when we got within a mile of the place. The growth was dense here, dense enough that we couldn’t move without pushing through some leaves, or stepping on twigs, or otherwise making what would be a racket to anyone paying attention. We slowed down even more, careful where we placed our feet, being as gentle as we could. The foliage and darkness would let us get close without being seen. It might not let us get close without being heard.

We still hadn’t gotten the actual sanctuary in sight when Elyse put up her hand to stop me. She motioned to our left, holding up one finger, and then four. She’d caught an aura, most likely a Touched sentry. She pointed to herself, and then back out.

I shook my head, motioning in the direction of the monastery. I didn’t want to risk taking anyone out and having them be missed.

We kept creeping forward. Twice, I got a sharp pain in my soul, feeling another quick shift of the balance, the needle tilting ever closer to Heaven. When it happened, I paused and leaned down against the ground, or found purchase on a tree, and did everything I could to stay quiet.

The good news was that if Adam was out killing demons, he wasn’t defending the sanctuary. It was as much as I could have hoped for.

We didn’t so much find the monastery, as the monastery found us. One second, there were thick bushes and trees, branches heavy with leaves, and the next there was an old stone wall, coated in a thick moss that ran along the uneven stones that had been piled to

make it. It was twelve feet tall, and I could see the scratches of faded scripture on the small bits that weren't hidden beneath the growth.

"This looks like the place," I whispered, putting my head against Elyse.

"I can sense a few weak auras on the other side. If there are angels in here, they're being muted."

"How else would an archangel hang out here on Earth without the demons knowing?"

"I'd feel better if we had some idea of the numbers."

"Numbers only matter if you get into a fight. Let's not get into a fight."

She smiled at that, turning to the wall and starting to scale it. She stayed tight up against it, muscles flexing, getting her head up to the top. I waited below while she scouted the landscape.

She dropped back down a minute later.

"Touched. Four of them. Swords across their backs. There's also a watch post near a tall iron gate, a tower with another Touched in it, keeping lookout. The gate is new, it looks like it was installed when they added the road. The road goes through a second inner gate, to the inside of the sanctuary. It's going to be tough to get there without being seen. Have you ever been to the Forbidden Palace in Beijing?"

"Not yet. I've seen pictures."

"The monastery looks kind of like that, but a lot smaller. Traditional Chinese architecture is long and low, with an emphasis on symmetry, courtyards, and not a lot of vertical walls. I'm sure you've at least seen a samurai flick or two?"

"Yes."

"There you go."

"Okay, so how do we get in?"

"First, let's circle around back. That will get us out of view of the gate. Then I'll jump the wall and take out one of the sentries."

"I think they'll notice if we drop a guard."

Elyse pulled a glove from a pocket of her jeans. It was made of some kind of leather and covered in runes. "This will let me glamour myself to look like the guard. They won't know he's missing right away. I'll cover you while you get over the wall and into the main building, and keep the way out open for you."

"I wanted you to go inside with me. It would be a lot easier to

stay unseen if I could sense them coming."

"I don't know how else to get you through unnoticed. If you want to try brute force, I'm still with you."

"No. We'll do it your way. Do you have anything on you that I might be able to use?"

She held up her hands to examine her rings. "This crap against your power? There's a reason I'm carrying so many, and it isn't because of my fashion sense."

I smiled at that. "Right. Let's go."

We circled around the outer wall, staying tight against it and keeping constant watch for any of the outer sentries to return, or any of the inner guards to decide to make a round on top of the stone barrier. The complex was larger than I had pictured it would be, much larger than the sanctuary I had been to in the Catskills. We chose stealth over speed, taking our time getting to the back, reaching it at the same time a light rain began to fall.

Elyse didn't say anything before she scaled the wall again, resting near the top, holding her weight with the tips of her toes and the strength of her arms. She glanced back at me once, rocked down, and then vaulted over.

I didn't hear her land on the other side. I pushed my power into my limbs and followed her track up the wall. I stuck my head up just in time to see her go up behind the guard, put one hand over his mouth, and use the other to cut his throat with a small cursed knife. She scooped him up over her shoulder and ran him back to the wall.

I reached out and used my power to pull, lifting the body up and over, dropping down and catching it on the other side. I lowered him silently to the ground, feeling a short wave of regret when his bloody throat came into view. It was never simple. It was never easy.

I moved back onto the wall, peering over. Elyse was standing near the center of the open patch of ground between the outer barrier and the inner sanctuary. A small haze shifted around her in the visage of the guard. The glamour. I was able to see through it. The Touched wouldn't be.

She scanned left and right, keeping her arm out and down, her palm facing outwards. I looked to the left and saw a second guard, making his way to the corner of the grounds and then spinning around and heading back. The moment he vanished from sight, she

closed her hand into a fist.

I sprung from the wall, up and over, landing smoothly at a run, heading straight for her. She turned her fist and stuck her thumb out, pointing it at a heavy wooden door between a pair of scripture covered columns and putting up a finger. I kept running, not even looking at her, crossing the open space in a matter of seconds. I bent my legs slightly as I approached the other side, pushing off the ground and using the force to send me arcing into the air at a tight angle towards the slanted tile rooftop ahead.

I pushed back against it as I neared, fighting to control the energy and keep the balance centered. Too much effort in any one direction would threaten to dislodge a tile, and make all of our sneaking around for nothing.

I landed almost gently, my boots making a slight *clink* along the clay when I landed. I was still for a few seconds, waiting to hear new movement. When none came, I climbed to the apex of the rooftop. There was another guard on the other side, a second outer courtyard with another building ten feet away. The guard was at attention, but he wasn't looking up. I leaped the distance over his head, coming down without a sound on the other side.

I was in.

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The inner sanctuary was quiet, the three layers of guards on the outside expected to keep anyone from getting as far as I had. I crouched at the top of the building and surveyed the grounds. I was standing on part of a long, rectangular building that boxed in the rest of the space, the rooftop running out of sight towards the front. Beyond it was a second building that was wider and shorter, and a few more that were positioned to create the symmetry that Elyse had mentioned.

The Heavenly Light was in the center.

I didn't need to see it to know it. The building there was three stories high and had a sharp gold roof that spilled downward as though it had been made from the falling light of Heaven itself. It was painted white, with blocks of prayer layered into it in gold paint.

There was a balcony that ran around the third floor of the pagoda, where columns rose at intervals to help support the roof.

An angel was standing on it, looking east.

She was beautiful. Magnificent. Her hair was red and gold and

brown, falling in waves down her back. Her face was soft and angled, her neck long and pale. She was wearing a gown of gossamer white and gold that shimmered in the light and framed her from behind, revealing the most perfect body I had ever laid eyes on, and at the same time somehow keeping the most private parts always hinted at but never displayed. She was love and peace, strength and courage, beauty and art form all at once. The sight of her brought a sudden jolt to my soul, lifting it to immediate elation, and dropping it as fast. I felt the cold calm of her, her Heavenly power just as Rose had described.

Blinding.

She was unaware that I was crouched a hundred feet away and staring, trying to regain control of my emotions after setting eyes on something so amazing. I had to remind myself over and over that right now, she was the enemy.

I rolled off the rooftop and down into the sanctuary, landing back on the ground without a sound. I needed to find Rose and Gervais, and hopefully Matthias. I needed to do it without her seeing me.

There was no easy way to search for them. There was no trick I could use to discover where they were being held. Instead, I moved from shadow to shadow, building to building, pushing open screen doors on wooden tracks and looking in, scanning rooms and moving on, constantly aware that I could be discovered at any moment.

I found the kitchen, where I was lucky enough to avoid the eyes of the Touched monks who were preparing the next days' meals.

I found the barracks, where more monks slept on simple cots in small rooms separated only by rice paper partitions.

I found the barn and the livestock, the communal baths, and even an old-fashioned loom.

I didn't find Rose and Gervais.

My search led me around the center building, to the front side where a black painted trailer was parked, an odd contrast to the old stone and wood of the ancient seraphim waypoint. The THI logo adorned each side of the trailer, and the back doors were hanging open. The inside was empty.

A rut ran out from behind the trailer, the ground impacted by the many feet that moved the armors away from the truck and inside the base of the pagoda. I followed it to a large door, the outside of which was decorated with a carved depiction of the face

of Jesus, head down, forehead bloodied by the crown of thorns resting on it. It was easy to tell that the columns at the base had been recently replaced, both by the lighter tone of the fresher wood, and by the volume and size of the scripture that covered them. The lettering glowed so faintly it was barely noticeable. It was active, the power in use. If I had to guess, it was to keep the archangel hidden.

I watched it intently as I crossed the threshold, waiting to see if any more of the scripture began to glow, or if the intensity changed with my passage. It didn't appear to be a tripwire, at least not one that could pick me up. I put my hand on Jesus' face and pushed gently on the door, watching it shift inward without a sound, leaving just enough room to slip through.

I entered the sanctuary, finding myself in a square room lit by a few LED lamps that had been placed along the floor and powered by a small generator that was sitting in the corner. Like the rest of the compound, the space inside was a square ring that ran the perimeter of the building, leaving the center open all the way up to the roof, surrounded by a series of metal columns emblazoned with scripture. In the middle of the open space, bathed in soft white light, was a simple stone altar, weathered and worn. Water pooled at its top and ran over the sides in a gentle trickle, landing in an array of white and gold flowers growing around the base.

The inner sanctuary. I was expecting it to be hidden away behind massive doors, the way it had been in New York. I was expecting it to be more protected. Was this place so unknown to the demons that it wasn't needed? Or was I just not able to trigger any of the defenses?

Someone was humming to my left.

I turned my head, tracing the wall.

First, I found the new Fists, connected to a steel and stone contraption that allowed them to hang lifeless from a pair of hooks, similar to what I had seen in the factory. There were twelve of them, their metal faces and bodies suggesting animation and displaying none, like marionettes waiting for their puppeteer.

Next, there was a desk, facing towards the wall. A laptop screen glowed on top of it, displaying what looked like a video game. I followed the screen to the keyboard, the keyboard to fingers, the fingers up to the face of the person at the controls.

Matthias Zheng.

He was humming as he played, so focused on the game that he hadn't seen or heard me. Was this really the guy that was helping the angels to bring the Rapture? Or was I looking at another fake?

I started walking towards him as though I was supposed to be there. Trying to sneak up might make him scream, and screaming would attract the attention of the archangel above.

I was almost sitting in his lap before he noticed me. He froze at first, his entire body locking up with tension, before he shoved his chair back and away from me.

"Whoa! What the he…heck? You shouldn't sneak up on people like that." He looked me over. "Who are you?"

"You're Matthias Zheng, right?"

He shrugged. He wasn't afraid of me. "Yeah."

"Come with me. We need to talk."

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He didn't argue or ask any questions. He got out of his chair and waited for me to lead the way. I brought him outside to the empty trailer.

"Hop up."

He looked at me, still unsure of my intentions, and then shrugged and pulled himself into the trailer. I followed behind, easing the doors most of the way closed behind us.

"Go up to the front and sit."

Matthias kept walking, following my instructions. He flopped down at the front of the trailer, landing on crossed legs.

"My name is Landon," I said. "Did Adam tell you about me?"

"Adam?"

"The angel."

"Angel? What are you talking about?"

Not quite the answers I was expecting. "Yes. Big wings, metal arm?"

He laughed, putting his hand to his head and rubbing his temple. "Angels don't exist."

I stood there, feeling more than a little confused. I decided to try a different approach. “You’ve been building robots.”

He nodded, taking his hand away and smiling. “Yeah. Isn’t that what you wanted to talk to me about? My Forward Operational Grunts? Are you an auditor?”

Forward Operational Grunts. Fists of God. Project Fog. Auditor? The words circulated through my mind. “Yes. They sent me to check on your progress. We’re eager to get your units into the field.”

He shook his head. “Only eight are operational so far. I’m having trouble getting my requisitions filled for power supplies.”

“Power supplies?”

“Yes. I keep asking Gretchen to send in new forms, and to call Nathan to see if he can expedite the acquisitions. According to her, there have been some setbacks at the factory due to the complexity of the engineering process. I mean, I get it, the fuel cells are still experimental. It’s frustrating though, because you guys… well, our bosses, they keep pushing me to get the rest of the units up and running, and I can’t.”

I stared at him, trying to make sense of the way he was talking. “Matthias, do you mind if I ask you a question? It’s going to sound really strange.”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Where are we right now?”

He laughed. “What do-“

“I told you it was going to sound strange.”

“We’re in one of the transport trailers, outside the lab.”

The lab? “Can you describe the lab to me?”

“Kind of drab, and the laptop you guys gave me is so last year. I’m making progress on the models though, taking the feedback you’ve been giving me to improve the specs.” He paused and smiled at me again. “I was working on it, I swear. The game was just a break, to let off some energy and refresh.”

I reached behind my back and drew the cursed knife, holding it out to him. “Do you know what this is?”

“I’ve seen guns before. This isn’t one of the ones I designed though.” He took it and put the point to his eye, his hands somehow managing to grip it without touching the sharp edge. “You should get one of mine. I wrote an algorithm to correct the boring to get another two, three hundred feet of accurate range.”

I held out my hand, and he dropped the weapon back into it.

"Have you ever seen anything… out of the ordinary?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"Angels. Demons."

He started laughing again. "Are you screwing with me? I told you, that stuff doesn't exist."

I put the dagger away and sat down across from Matthias. I had been baffled by his immunity to the Divine. I had thought maybe he was like me. The truth was even stranger than that.

Not only was he immune to Divine power, he was completely unable to See them. He was one of the Sleeping, helping Heaven to tilt the balance and not even knowing it. Somehow, his mind was trapped in the subconscious denial that all mortals succumbed to, and not even daily interaction with the Divine had broken him out.

He was the most blissfully ignorant mortal I had ever heard of.

"I was just testing you," I said. "I've been getting reports that some of the other engineers are suffering from fatigue and lack of sleep, and its leading them to develop symptoms, such as hallucinations."

"Oh. That sucks. No, I haven't had that problem. I get plenty of sleep. Gretchen set me up with a nice room right on campus."

"Excellent. We need to make sure our top people are being taken care of."

"Yeah, I am. I'm happy. I mean, I don't get out much lately, but - deadlines, you know."

"Yes, and believe me when I say we're grateful to you. I just have a few more questions I need to ask you about your work, so I can put it in my report."

"Okay. Shoot."

"The communication system to coordinate the fogs. Can you describe it to me?"

His eyes lit up. "Sure." He looked around the trailer. "It would be better with a whiteboard."

"I have a good visual memory."

"Okay. Well yeah, one of the problems we were having with the units was keeping them synchronized and performing without having to load massive memory banks and CPU cores, which I'm sure you know would have led to much higher power requirements, which leads to added weight for heat sinks, that sort of thing. So me and Gretchen, she's my assistant, we devised a static comm system.

Basically, it gets fitted onto a UAV or other HAO, and it can send and receive signals, and pass information between all of the fogs that are in range. In simple terms, it's like cloud-based warfare."

In more ways than he realized. I didn't know what Gretchen's real name was, but I could guess who she was, and I could start to piece together the clues to this mystery.

Somehow, the angels had discovered the work Matthias was doing with the organic wiring. Somehow, they had learned that for some reason he had a strange inability to grasp the concept of the Divine. They had used their contacts at Los Alamos to reach out to the company he was working for, and recruit him to their cause. Then they had shipped him off to the lab, put him on Project Fog, and told him whatever they wanted to about what he was doing. He couldn't see through the veil to the truth, and so he had followed blindly in the name of his country, and not only perfected the robotics, but also developed the systems needed to control them, at least as far as his mortal brain could take it.

Gretchen, the archangel, had picked up the slack, using his knowledge of technology and enhancing it with her knowledge of Heavenly scripture. Between the two of them, they had created a perfect system.

He had also confirmed what I had suspected. Adam's hand was acting as the server, syncing the data between the Fists and helping keep them coordinated.

"Let's say our enemies wanted to disable the fog," I said. "Where are we on that front?"

"It wouldn't be easy," he said. "The value of organic wiring isn't just the cost savings. The fog is completely immune to EMP. So is the comm system. The armor can take high-caliber fire, and we just recently added some new bolstering to protect some of the vulnerable joints." He paused, looking up to the ceiling in thought. "No. Short of a high-powered explosion, the fogs themselves are pretty much indestructible, just like you ordered. I mean, if you could manage to hit the UAV and bring it down, I think that would be the weakest link. Shut down the server and the units lose their brains. Last time I checked, there wasn't a military on Earth that had the tech to see a drone at fifty thousand feet, let alone knock it down."

"Impressive," I said, my mind reeling. It wasn't enough to knock Adam out of the sky. If I wanted to stop him, stop the Fists, I

needed to cut off his arm. That was easier said than done when he could fly, and I couldn't.

"Oh yeah, its totally cool. What do you think about the warheads we designed? And the close combat capabilities? Oh, and my success in miniaturizing the circuitry. That was a real challenge. I didn't sleep for weeks trying to work that one out."

"We've been very impressed with all of your efforts."

He was beaming at the praise. "I'm going to call my mom after this. She'll be so happy to know how well I'm doing."

"There are a dozen of the fog units in the lab. Are all of them only waiting on a power supply to be operational?"

"Mmm Hmm. Once you guys get us the fuel cells, we can switch all of them on."

"What about comm systems?"

"We only have the one right now. It was a prototype, you know. But we should be done with the load testing in the next week or two, once we get all the units online, and then we can start building more."

"Exciting times."

He laughed. "Yeah, it's been a lot of fun. If you're done with your questions, I should probably get back to work."

I stared at him, trying to decide what to do. It was clear I couldn't risk leaving him here, which meant I had two options. Take him with me, or kill him.

No, I couldn't kill him. What if he went to Heaven, and decided to continue playing along? What if he didn't even realize he had died? There was something about him, something that made him unique to all of mankind, and I needed to understand what it was, and what the fallout of that would be.

"I had heard there were two new engineers being brought in today," I said. "Have you seen them?"

"No. I've been in the lab all day. I hadn't heard anything about new blood."

"If they had arrived, do you know where they would be?"

"Yeah, probably bunked near me."

"Can you take me over to them? I'm not familiar with the layout yet. I spent the last couple of weeks in New Mexico."

He was hesitant. "I don't know…"

"You can get back to work as soon as you get me there."

"Okay, why not." He got to his feet. "Why did you want to do

this in the trailer anyway?"

"They haven't given me an office yet, and I wanted our conversation to be private. I'll be speaking to Gretchen a little later, to get her feedback, too."

"Sounds good. Follow me."

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We didn't make it out of the trailer.

I was just about to push open the rear door when the familiar thump of something heavy hitting the ground next to us caused me to freeze in place. It was followed by three… no… four… no five more thumps.

Six Fists. A dozen angels. Adam.

Then I heard the voice.

"What are you doing? You can't do this to me. Angels don't use torture."

There was a small crack in the trailer doors. I wasn't going to risk being seen.

"I really have to get back to work," Matthias said. "Gretchen gets pissed when I disappear on her."

I couldn't afford being discovered right now, and if they found Matthias gone they were sure to go looking for him. I rounded on him, grabbing his arm and pushing him against the wall. "Nobody knows I'm here, got it? You'll jeopardize the whole audit."

He nodded and smiled. "No problem. I won't say a word."

“If you see me watching, act like I’m not there.”

“Okay. Okay.”

I let him go and moved back into the shadows. He pushed open the trailer door and hopped down.

“Matthias?”

It was Adam’s voice.

“Hey, Captain Rogers.”

“What were you doing in the trailer?”

Matthias laughed. “Oh, just taking a little break. I needed someplace quiet to think. You took the fogs out for a field run? I didn’t even hear you.”

“Yes. Just some short maneuvers around the base.”

“Cool.”

“I’ve got something for you.”

“Hey, what are you doing? Get your damn hands off me. You son of a bitch. I’m going to-“

It was a third voice for sure, muffled at the end, as though something had been shoved into the speaker’s mouth.

I moved up the edge of the trailer, dropping to my stomach and peering through the opening. I was almost at eye level with Adam and Matthias, standing less than ten feet away. I could see one of the Fists standing to his right, clutching a demon by the shoulders, one of its large hands over the fiend’s mouth. He was wiggling and squirming beneath the machine’s grip. It was a waste of time.

“You got me another unit,” Matthias said, his eyes lighting up.

I noticed he was looking at the demon.

“Yes, and I should have the rest by tomorrow. I wanted to bring this one by and make sure the outputs were compatible.”

“Let’s bring it inside so we can test it. Gretchen is going to be so excited.”

Matthias led Adam into the sanctuary. The Fist holding the demon followed behind, while the others moved into an organized line and went still.

Another unit? Compatible outputs? I slid back to my feet. Could it mean what I thought it meant?

There was only one way to find out.

I eased out of the trailer, dropping to the ground and rolling back below it, hiding behind the wheels. I watched the Fists for a few seconds, making sure they wouldn’t react, and then circled around towards the side of the sanctuary, keeping an eye out for the

angels that had delivered them.

My path was clear.

I looked up, finding the balcony where the archangel had been standing. She was gone. I pushed out with my power, throwing myself upwards and landing softly.

The upper floor of the sanctuary had been claimed by the archangel. Beyond the balcony was another ten feet or so of bamboo flooring that vanished at the central sky well, which tumbled down to the altar. Resting on the floor was a red woven mat, threadbare on the sides where the knees would rest, as well as a quill and a bottle of ink. Pages and pages of parchment sat alongside it, some of them blank, many of them written on, and many more written on, crumpled, and tossed aside. Hanging from the walls was even more scripture. It was black ink, and it didn't glow. Prayers.

I inched my way over to one of the balled up pages and picked it up. It was scripture. Like a composer writing a song, she was trying to create new bindings of power, to go beyond what she and Matthias had already accomplished with the Fists, or the holy hand grenade that had leveled the warehouse in San Francisco.

"Matthias, you're supposed to tell me when you're stepping outside." It was the first time I heard her voice. It echoed in my mind, resonating through my soul. It was more than beautiful. It was disarming.

"You weren't here," Matthias said. "Anyway, aren't you supposed to be *my* assistant?"

She laughed. It was a melody that burned me. "Yes, and you need someone to keep an eye on you. How many times have you wandered off when you were supposed to be working?"

"I get bored."

"You don't have time to be bored now."

I walked over to the edge of the well and looked down. The archangel was standing near the altar, looking back towards Matthias. There was the sound of castors on the stone floor, and then one of the lifeless Fists rolled into view. Adam placed it to the left of the altar, leaving it hanging from its rack.

"They made some modifications to the power supply," the archangel said. "You may need to adjust the thresholds so we don't overload the circuits."

"Okay."

I waited a few heartbeats, until Matthias came into view. He went around to the rear of the armor and plugged a pair of wires into its back. He was cradling a laptop in his arms.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said.

“Adam,” the archangel said.

There was some rustling, and the angel appeared, holding the demon in his arms. They had done something to him to knock him out. Adam carried him to the altar and placed him on it, ripping off his shirt and exposing a scarred chest.

I sucked in a deep breath, my heart hanging as everything started to become clear. Alichino had said the scripture on the inside was to keep something contained, and now I knew what. Unlike the angels, the Fists were able to attack without provocation. It wasn’t some special grant from God that made it happen, it was because they were demons. At least, they were powered by the souls of demons. It was the communication system that controlled them, the cloud-based brain that separated the angels from the machines. It was a loophole. A damn hack.

Something hit me in the head.

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It came up from the second floor, down and across from me, smacking into my ear and flying off to the left. It clinked on the ground behind me, not loud enough to be heard below.

The strike took me by surprise, and I fought against my instincts in order to stay still and not reveal myself unless there was a true danger. If Adam or the archangel had seen me, they would have used more than a pebble to attack.

I shifted my eyes in the general direction of the small stone's origin, down to a wall that obscured part of the lower floor. Peeking out from behind it was Gervais.

He was giving me the finger and smiling.

I should have expected as much. The angels had probably locked them in a room or something and forgotten about them, thinking they were just your run of the mill human beings, and of course the fiend had gotten them out. It wasn't only the demons who were capable of miscalculation.

He lowered his finger, and then pointed down below and shook his head. He brought his fist into his hand, suggesting an attack.

I shook my head in return. An archangel, the First Inquisitor, and six Fists of God against the three of us. It was straight up suicide. The only thing we had in our favor was the element of surprise.

He pointed up to me, flapped his hands like wings, and drew a line across his throat. Then he pointed at himself and then made glasses on his face, symbolizing Matthias.

I looked down below. The archangel was leaning over the demon on the altar. She had a small inkwell in her hand, and she was dipping her finger in it and then drawing scripture on the fiend's chest. He was still out cold, with no idea what was about to happen to him.

I pointed at Gervais, back at myself, and then held up three fingers. Where the hell was Rose?

He motioned to the other side of the well, directly beneath me. I tilted my head, and saw the hand rising up out of the shadows, giving me a thumbs up.

By the time I looked back, the demon was already on his way down.

I had half a second to make the choice. It didn't seem like a long time, but a lot of thoughts could flash through the mind in that small space. Should I follow him down, or leave him to die? I didn't care at all for his future, but I did care about what he knew, and I did care if Rose got screwed because of his stupidity. Then again, if I died here and now on some overly impulsive, ill-conceived attack, it was the whole world that would wind up paying for it. If I let it happen, there would still be the Fists. There would still be the archangel. There would still be Adam. Was it going to get easier to stop it later? It wasn't much of a chance, but what if it was the best chance I ever got?

I pushed, sending myself sliding off the edge of the balcony, falling headlong towards the archangel. I pulled, bringing the jagged dagger to my hand. I saw Gervais hit the ground beside Matthias, wrenching the laptop from his hand and putting his knife to the engineer's throat. The action startled the archangel, causing her to stand up and turn towards him.

I pushed again, outward, using the upward force to turn myself over and land on the altar with a light splash, my legs spread to either side of the demon, my body crouched low. I grabbed the archangel by the hair, pulling her head back and putting the dagger

to her throat.

Time stopped. I could feel my breath as though it was a stream of energy flowing into my mouth and down my throat. I could hear my heart beat, a solid thump that echoed and vibrated in the stillness of the moment. I was bathed in the light of Heaven, dropping into this world from that one, or maybe rising up. It was cool and peaceful and seductive. It made promises to my soul, of rest and hope and joy. I could sense every strand of hair I was holding, soft and firm in my hand. I could see the long, pale neck of the archangel, and the grimy, speckled matte of the weapon I was threatening to kill her with.

It was a struggle not to let go. It was a struggle not to fall into a heap and bawl like a child, or beg for forgiveness. This was the promise I had made. The responsibility I had accepted.

“Stop,” I said, pushing the knife into her throat, tight enough that a deep enough breath would cut in, deliver the poison, and end her existence.

“Mr. Landon?” Matthias said. “What’s happening?” He was standing completely still, Gervais’ weapon against his throat. He wasn’t scared or upset, just confused.

“Landon-“ Adam was six feet away, the runes on his arm glowing.

“Don’t,” I said. “I know how it works. Keep it still.”

His arm went to his side.

“Diuscrucis,” the archangel whispered. “Please. You don’t know what you’re doing. Let me go, and we can talk about it.”

There was power in her voice. I could feel it slamming against me, the pressure of her Calming words. I pushed back with my own power, balancing it out, preventing the words from swaying me.

“Not another word,” I said. I glanced up to the second floor, checking for Rose, wondering why she hadn’t dropped after us. She was there in the shadows, out of sight. Was she staying out of this one? I couldn’t blame her if she was.

“Landon. You can’t get out of this. There are five more of the Fists waiting outside. Even if you kill Matthias. Even if you kill Margaret.”

“How can you do this?” I said. “How can you think this is right?”

“The Lord allows-“

“Bullshit! Your arm. The Fists. You’re using demons. There’s no

way God is supporting you. There's no way this is anything but a cheat." My eyes found his, burning into them. "Of all of the seraphim, I can't believe that you're going along with this."

His face tightened as his anger grew. "You of all people think that you can judge me, judge my actions? You're a slave to your duty. I'm a conduit to mine. I do what I must to protect what I believe in. It doesn't matter if I respect you. It doesn't matter if we were friends. Ultimately, you're an enemy of Heaven, an enemy of God."

"And that means that you can bend and twist the rules however you see fit? What do you believe He would think about breaking His laws to win? Or do you think because she is here, that makes it okay?" I held the archangel a little tighter. "What are you doing here, anyway? Do you know what would happen if the demons knew you were on Earth?"

"They will never know. I travel only from the factory to the sanctuary, to aid in the production of the Heavenly Weapons, the tools of our victory. Of all the archangels in Heaven, I alone have accumulated the knowledge and skill to create the new scripture. I alone have harnessed the blessing of the Lord to turn evil to good, to use chaos to create order. If that is not God's will, then why do I exist?"

"Why are you guys fighting about the fogs?" Matthias said. "I thought the budget was approved?"

"Even the seraphim have free will," I replied, ignoring Matthias. "You have pursued the path of scripture, have come into your own power. He will not stop you. That doesn't mean He will always support you."

I felt her throat move and clench beneath my blade. "Don't pretend to have the slightest feel of His desires, diuscrucis. You are worse than any demon. You don't champion mankind, you prevent them from rising and being with their Creator."

I held steady, returning my attention to Adam. "Adam, think about this. She's leading you down a path you don't want to travel. You may get your wish. You may kill me today. At what cost? At what price? The victory of angels on the backs of demons."

"A victory is a victory. I learned that from you, and your battles. 'Find a way to destroy the diuscrucis.' That is what they said to me, Landon. That is my command. You know well enough not to attack first. You don't have the demons' blind hatred to slip you up. There

was no other way. There is no other way. If I fall, I fall in His service."

My heart was pounding, my hands were sweaty. I could feel the coldness of my grip on the dagger, the clammy moisture tight against the hilt. Maybe he was right. Maybe there was no other way for the angels to come after me. It wouldn't be the first time God required sacrifice to meet his will.

"Kill me, diuscrucis," Margaret said. "Kill me, if you can. Kill me if your heart is so filled with evil and hate that you can bring the end to one who has served in the name of good for centuries. I am secure in my place in His universe. Are you?"

Her words carried power. I felt it wash against me, a rough sea against a rocky shore. I tightened my grip on the dagger, beginning to feel dizzy. I had told Rose that what made us strong was our unpredictability, our strength of emotions. Even though the seraphim had once been mortal, they were qualities that were easy to forget in service to Heaven. They were qualities that were easy for any Divine to forget, as the Beast had.

She had miscalculated me. She had underestimated who and what I was.

"Yes," I said, running the blade across her flesh.

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She didn't scream. The poison spread through her like a bolt of lightning, turning her entire face and chest dark, turning her hair white, the feathers dropping from her folded wings and floating to the ground as dried out husks. She didn't even have time to bleed.

Her ash dropped to the base of the altar in front of me, mixing with the water there and quickly turning it an inky black. I dove towards Adam even as he backed away, raising his hand, the scripture glowing as the commands were sent.

I was less than a foot from him when the Fist slammed into me, driving me sideways and into, and then through, the flimsy paper walls of the sanctuary. I tumbled on the wet ground, rolling and getting to my feet. I looked back towards the altar, feeling my anger double as I watched Gervais' dagger sink into Matthias Zheng's chest.

"No!" I shouted, pushing out, throwing him away from the engineer. Of all of us there, Matthias was the only one that was completely innocent. He was the only one who didn't know what he was doing.

I was too late. He fell to the ground, clutching at his stomach, the dagger still protruding from it.

It was all I got to see, because the Fist hit me again, its blade sinking deep into my gut. It used it to lift me from the ground, holding me above its head and drawing back its other arm, ready to decapitate me.

I could see Adam behind it, wings out and headed into the sky. His face was grim, his eyes cloudy with tears. In that face, I could see that Margaret was more than his superior.

Sharp echoes rippled across the night, blinding flashes launching from the balcony to my left. The Fist's elbow shattered as dozens of bullets pounded into it, ripping the delicate joint apart and forcing it to drop me. I slid off the end of the blade, choking on my blood, forcing my energy into the wound to heal it. The Fist turned towards the balcony, launching its bolts at the shooter, and I saw Rose drop, land on the ground and roll to her feet. She had a rifle cradled in her arms, and she turned it and continued to fire, the bullets doing nothing to the thicker chest armor, but keeping its attention fixed on her and giving me time to get to my feet.

The ground began to shake.

The rest of the Fists were active. I didn't need to see them to know it.

I felt a breeze behind me, turned and caught the arm of an angel before he could bring his blade around and into my skull. I twisted, breaking the arm, and then brought the dagger around, shoving it up into his chest and watching him fall to ash in my grip. Another landed in front of me, and a bullet caught her in the head, knocking her backwards.

I pushed, throwing myself back and away, avoiding the reach of the one-armed Fist. It didn't fire its bolts at me, turning back towards Rose instead. She dropped the gun and ran, disappearing around the corner of the sanctuary, opposite the other Fists.

I landed on a rooftop, scanning the sky for Adam. The only way to stop them was to break the link. The only way to break the link was to destroy his arm.

Two more angels landed on either side of me, launching their attacks in unison. I blocked the angel on the left with the dagger, leaning back to avoid the sword of the one on the right. At the same time, I saw the flashes from the Fists, and heard the screaming of the bolts.

I couldn't manage all of it at once. I dropped from my feet, sliding down the side of the rooftop, even as I caught the bolts and threw them into the angels, impaling them and sending them off the roof in the other direction. I slipped from the decline and landed on the ground, right next to Elyse.

"I thought we were going for stealth. What the hell are you doing?" She had dropped the glamour, and she held the spatha in hand. There was blood on it.

"Making mischief," I said, gritting my teeth and pushing, sending myself hurtling towards the one-armed fist. It tried to block me, but it wasn't as strong with a missing appendage. I barreled into it, continuing the push, using the force to send it backwards, feet dragging along the ground until it finally fell back and into the others. I rolled forward off of it, forcing the Fists to turn around to track me. The one thing I had over them was speed, and I needed it.

I pushed off again, going high into the air towards the top balcony of the sanctuary. I saw Elyse squaring off against an angel, one of the bracelets on her arm flaring red as it caught a sword strike, and the spatha coming up and around and digging deep into the seraph's arm. The wound didn't matter, the poison did. It abandoned the fight to heal.

"Where are you?" I screamed into the night, searching for Adam in the darkness.

"Here." He appeared behind me, slamming me in the gut with the metal arm, the force of it throwing me off the balcony. I fought to regain control, to stop my descent, and failing. I went through the roof of the opposite building, and then through the wall, coming out on the other side.

I watched him launch high into the air, the arm glowing and moving, fingers tapping. A Fist blasted through the wall of the building I'd just gone through, blades flashing in the night. I rolled away from its attack, kicking it hard enough in the side to push it off balance. I tried to slide the dagger into its elbow joint and missed, the scripture flaring and knocking my arm aside, leaving it numb. I backed away as it turned, looking for a path out.

"Master!" I heard her soft, raspy growl, and then she was on top of me, pushing me to the earth and bounding away at the same time the bolts flew through the air where we had just been. Alyx landed on her stomach and slid along the ground, bunching up and pouncing on the nearest Fist, her own monstrous weight throwing it

to the ground. She leaped away from it before it could recover, getting away from its blades. Bolts launched behind her, and I reached out and caught them, pulling them into the ground.

I scanned the sky again, searching for Adam, gaining a moment of relief thanks to Alyx's distraction. The ground shook around me, the Fists still coming. I was starting to feel tired, the power becoming unstable in my soul. I couldn't do this forever.

I found another rooftop and pushed, sending myself towards it, trying to get a better vantage point. I found Alyx and Elyse together, the Nicht Criedem and the Great Were, engaging the Touched and the angels that entered the fray while trying to stay away from the Fists. I found Rose near the sanctuary, cornered by a pair of seraphim, her hands in the air. I found Gervais leaning over the body of Matthias Zheng, his face near his pelvis, covered in blood. He was being ignored in the chaos around him. I knew what he was doing, and I didn't like it.

I found the blessed dagger at my calf and drew it, ready to dive in on the demon and put an end to him once and for all, ready to forget about his claims that there were others attempting to summon Abaddon. He wanted what Matthias Zheng knew. He wanted to know how to make the machines. He could figure out how to power them later, and I knew if I gave him the chance he would.

That was when I spotted Adam.

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He was a speck in the corner of my eye. I wouldn't have noticed him at all, if it weren't for the feeling of him in my senses. He was high in the air, over the sanctuary, sitting in the Heavenly Light that was now piercing the night sky. It was an alarm, a call to arms, a request for reinforcements.

This had to end now, or it was all going to end.

I couldn't reach him. I couldn't touch him. He was a mile away or more, drifting through the clouds. Of all the tools the angels had, it was one of their best defenses against me.

I couldn't fly.

I heard a yelp, looked down and saw that Alyx had been hit by a bolt, watched as she lost her monster form. Elyse leaned over her, doing something with one of her artifacts, even as a Fist approached them. I found Rose again, held by the angels, her arms locked behind her back.

My gaze returned to Adam. He knew he was going to win. He knew he could stay up there, guide the Fists, and tip the balance. He was resolute before I had killed his love. He wouldn't take any

chances now.

I had one chance. One crazy chance. It was unpredictable, and aggressive to the point of being stupid. It was something Rose probably would have loved.

I focused my power, gathering it in my soul, pushing it tighter and tighter, making it dense and heavy inside me. Then I pushed it out ahead of me, and at the same time pulled it behind. I started to feel lightheaded, even as the way became clear, Adam appearing as though we were only a foot apart.

It was my special sauce, my ultimate use of power. I would be lucky to stay conscious when I got to the other side. I didn't have a choice.

I stepped forward, through the fold of time and space, out into the sky way above the sanctuary. I appeared in front of Adam, literally out of thin air, reaching out and wrapping my arms around his neck before I had a chance to fall. My head swam, the world spinning around me, my eyes refusing to focus.

"What the-" I heard Adam say, even as I gripped him tight and rested my head on his shoulder.

"Going down," I said. I was drained, wasted. Rose had given me another idea and I used it now, turning my clothes to lead and weighing myself down.

It was more than he could handle, and we began to fall.

His arms pummeled my sides as he tried to get free, but I held on tight, ripping him from the sky. We went straight down, bathed by the Heavenly Light, twisting and rotating in the air, but still descending. I fought to stay alert, to be ready for when we hit. I would need to heal faster than he could heal. I would need to destroy him before he could destroy me.

The sanctuary approached in a hurry, growing larger and larger beneath us. We were going too fast for him to recover now, and so I pushed the energy out, returning my clothes to normal, giving myself the mobility I would need to attack.

"I'm sorry," I said, right before we reached the well and continued down. We landed on top of the altar, the stone splitting with a massive crack that reached across the night, sending ripples of thunder out to the horizon.

My limbs shattered. My back, my legs, my arms. The pain was unbelievable. It took all of my strength to focus, all of my energy to stay lucid and begin to heal. The world faded in and out of view as I

stumbled to my feet, finding them still broken, and falling to the ground. I pushed myself up again, gathering myself at last.

Adam was still on the ground, his arm bent and twisted and mangled by the force of its impact against the altar. He lay there with his clothes torn, his mouth open, his eyes red with rage.

Red eyes? I stared down at him. His wings were bent beneath him, no longer white and gold. They were brown and black, with flecks of red.

He had fallen.

"Why," he said, looking up at me, anger and pain and sadness all colliding. "I did what was asked. I did what was demanded."

"You know why," I said. I still had the cursed dagger in my hand, and I knelt down next to him. "Look what you did to this place."

The sanctuary was defiled. The altar was cracked, the water black with the archangel's remains.

"What I did? What… *I* … did?" His face twisted into a gruesome snarl. "You caused this, Landon. You did this."

I was calm in the face of his storm. "No. You should have found another way. You had eternity."

"There was no other way. I had no choice."

"We always have a choice."

He sat and stared at me, his chest heaving.

"It's over," I said. "The arm is destroyed. The Fists are broken."

He looked over at the crushed arm, as if he had forgotten he even had it. He looked back at me, and then his foot lashed up, catching me in the chin.

"This isn't over," he said, leaping on top of me. I was weak. Too weak to fight back. Too weak to stop him from killing me.

There was a crash from the front of the room, as the door flew open. Alyx landed a dozen feet away, snarling at the angel.

"It isn't over," he repeated, spreading his wings. He rose into the air, back up through the well, the Heavenly Light lost to it, and to him. The tears continued to stream from his eyes as he vanished into the night.

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“Landon,” Alyx said, losing the Great Were form and rushing to my side. She knelt over me, leaning down and kissing my forehead.

“Help me up?” I said. Adam might have left, but my own anger was still smoldering.

Alyx got her arms under me and lifted me to my feet. Rose and Elyse made their way inside together. Rose had a cut on her cheek and her clothes were torn and muddy. She had an angel’s sword in her hand. Elyse looked hot and tired, but otherwise unharmed.

“Landon?” Rose said.

“Where is he?” I asked. I scanned the room.

“Gone,” a new voice said.

I turned towards it. The fiend that had been on the altar. He had woken at some point, and was hiding in the shadows. Now he came out to us.

“I saw him leave. That way.” He pointed through the hole I had made in the wall. I found Matthias’ body a few feet away from it. It was laying in a pool of blood, the stomach torn open with none of the care that had been taken with Gervais’ other victims.

“I can’t take the chance that you’re lying to me,” I said. I didn’t know if Gervais could take the form of demons, or only humans. “Rose?”

She didn’t hesitate to grab the demon’s shoulder and run him through. His eyes went wide, and he fell over.

I waited for him to change.

He didn’t.

“Damn it,” I said, lacking the energy to put much force behind it. I stumbled towards Matthias, with Alyx continuing to hold me up. “He can’t have gone far. Alyx?”

“I’m sorry, Master. I can’t track a scent I’m not familiar with.”

Or one that he could change constantly.

“He took his form,” Rose said.

“He doesn’t care about his form. He cares about what he has in his head. The archangel was powering the Fists with the souls of demons, and she was using scripture to do it. He can’t replicate that, but he can rebuild the control system, and he’s smart enough to work out how to use it to his advantage.”

“Hell already has one of the Fists,” Rose said. “The one you crushed in L.A.”

I had forgotten about that. “You’re right. Hopefully, it’s too damaged to be much use to him.”

“I don’t know. We both sensed the archangel when we went into the factory. I told him we should turn back. He insisted we take our chances, to try to find Zheng. He was almost crazed about it. He wasn’t even upset when we were captured. It was almost like he knew what would happen, and that he wanted it to happen. He could have broken us out any time, and I think we would have escaped, but he insisted that we wait.”

“He knew I would come for you.”

“Not only that you would. He seemed to know when, or at least make a solid guess. I don’t think he planned everything from the Underground, but… seven hundred years? That's a lot of experience. I think he’s unbelievably good at improvising. Remember when he said there was always a game, and he would find another way?”

“You think this is his other way?”

“Don’t you?”

I wasn’t sure. It might have been a full plan, or a stepping stone, but there was no denying the demon’s intelligence, or his ability to

calculate and improvise. He had pushed me into attacking the archangel, knowing it was a risk, and weighing it against the reward. It worked out in the end, and I had stopped the Fists. He had used the chaos to get what he wanted, too.

"It doesn't matter right now," I said. "We had to stop Margaret and Adam. What happened to him after only proved that even Heaven wasn't completely aligned to their way of thinking. Gervais will turn up again sooner or later. We had a deal made in blood. I held up my end by defeating the Fists. It will be agonizing for him to resist fulfilling his side."

"So what do we do now?" Elyse asked.

"We have to figure out how to take apart the Fists. We can't risk that Gervais will rebuild the communication system and work out how to bring the active ones back online. We also have to go back to the factory and get rid of the machinery that miniaturized the scripture. Angels with guns…" I shook my head. "That's one escalation we can't afford to allow."

"Espanto had a compactor in the junkyard that could crush anything down to a slab of scrap," Alyx said. "And I mean anything. There must be something like that somewhere around here."

"Good idea," I said. "Can you help Elyse get the Fists loaded back onto the trailer?"

"Of course, Master." She started to extract herself from me, forcing me to stand on my own. I was good for a few seconds, and then started to stumble.

"I've got him," Rose said, ducking in and pulling me back upright.

"I don't really like to time walk," I said, trying to get my head to stop spinning. I turned myself so we were facing one another. "You did pretty well for a mortal."

She laughed at that. "You did pretty well for a… whatever you are. The aggressive approach worked out for you."

"This time."

"Emotional and unpredictable, right?"

"Yeah."

She leaned up and kissed me. I could taste the sweat and dirt and blood on her lips, mixing with my own. It was nice as kisses go, but it was missing something. From her? From me? I'd done the checklist, and she had hit every mark. Maybe I was just tired.

"Like ships in the night," she said, staying close and looking up

at me. She'd felt it, too. "We'll always have the Happy Bay Inn."

I tried to laugh, but it wasn't worth the dizziness that followed. "Help me over to Matthias?"

"Sure."

It was hard to look at him after what Gervais had done to his body, but I felt like I needed to give his passing a moment of my time.

"He was clueless about the Divine. Completely unaware of the hidden world that existed around him, even though he was knee deep in it. It's a rare thing to be that innocent. A gift. It's my fault he's dead."

"You did what you had to do," Rose said. "And the next time we cross paths with that asshole, don't try to stop me from making sure he gets what he deserves."

Matthias certainly hadn't gotten what he deserved.

I hoped it was worth it.

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“Good,” Elyse said, stepping back and using her twin daggers to block Rose’s furious assault. I sat on a couch with Alyx, in the corner of the space we’d cleared for the sparring.

“No. It’s not right,” Rose said, coming to an abrupt stop. “My elbow is too low, my feet are too wide. You’re being too easy on me.”

Elyse put the daggers down. I tossed her a couple of towels that were resting on the arm of the couch. “You have to start somewhere. The training you did brought you a long way in a short time, but you know the Divine are faster than you can ever be. Which means you need to be smarter, more prepared.”

“An unpredictable egg,” I said.

Rose laughed and wiped the sweat from her brow. “Right. So when do we take some of this training out into the real world?”

It had been three weeks since we’d come back to New York, after doing everything we could to dispose of the Fists of God, and make sure whatever remained of them would never see the light of day again. I’d sent Alyx out looking for Gervais three or four times

that night, trying to catch a scent, or listening for someone moving through the woods alone. I'd asked Elyse to scour the newly empty and unholy sanctuary in search of him.

They had both come up empty.

I wasn't sure how he could have gotten away so easily. Elyse's guess was that he had kept a rift stone secreted away, ready to use the moment he needed a quick escape. It made sense. As much sense as anything about the demon did.

Somehow, he had reneged on our deal, and had never surrendered the names of the demons that were working to bring Abaddon back into the world. I couldn't imagine how that was even possible, when all Divine were subject to the same rules, one of the very few things both sides had ever agreed on. And yet he had managed it, and in doing so had forced Obi, Dante and Alichino scrambling to discover the origin of the demon's warning, and to try to come up with the identities of those involved.

So far they were coming up empty, too.

"Not for a while," I replied. "The balance is leaning towards Heaven right now, and you just said yourself that you still need a little more work."

"I did say that, didn't I?" Rose said.

I glanced over at Elyse, catching her return look. We had yet to approach Rose about the tattoos and the artifacts, and what she would have to do if she wanted to make use of them. She was still struggling to come to grips with what she had done, having visited me in the middle of the night a few times to talk about it. Just because she wanted to help, and was willing to use violence to do it, didn't mean it didn't take its toll. It was something we all had to go through at some point.

Alyx lifted her arms up over her head and yawned, stretching her body languidly back like a cat. Her head was resting in my lap, and she looked up at me with big, dark eyes that simmered with the contentment that had filled her since I'd gotten her away from Espanto.

Well, maybe not all of us had to go through it.

Even so, and maybe despite the fiend's best intentions, Alyx wasn't just a killing machine. Her heart was warm and open enough to at least make an effort to be sensitive and understanding, and she was fiercely loyal in a way that Obi, Rose, Elyse, or even Dante could never be. It was more than a decision for her. It was a basic

instinct, a raw desire to protect and care for her alpha, who just happened to be me. I wasn't too fond of bossing her around, or her insistence on calling me 'Master', but she had found whatever soft spot remained in my soul and latched herself tight onto it.

I was willing to deal with the complications.

"I love you," Alyx said.

She said it a lot, and I knew that she meant it. I smiled back at her and ran my hand across her forehead. I couldn't say the words back. I wasn't there. Yet? I didn't know, and I didn't have to right now. There was no reason to rush into anything, and she had accepted my perspective after the third or fourth time I had given it.

"What do you say we call it a day?" Elyse said. "I'm going to hit the shower and then grab a bite from that Italian place down the block."

"Do you mind if I join you?" Rose asked.

"In the shower, or the restaurant?"

Rose laughed, but she didn't clarify. I knew she and Elyse had hit it off over the last couple of weeks. What they did outside of my presence was none of my business.

"Someone is at your door," Alyx said, her nose flaring and wrinkling, a motion that got cuter every time I saw it.

"Who?" I asked. "Obi? Dante?"

"I don't know. I haven't smelled them before. This one reeks of paper and aftershave."

She sat up instinctively as I got to my feet and headed to the door. We were four apartments down from mine, in a space we had emptied to make room for the sparring.

"Divine?" I asked, reaching out for the knob.

"No," Alyx replied.

"Gervais?" Rose said, reaching down and picking up her weapon again.

He still knew where I lived. Right now, I wanted him to.

I finished opening the door and stepped out into the hall. There was a man standing in front of my apartment, in a brown shirt and shorts. UPS.

"Hey, you have a package for Landon Hamilton?" I asked.

He turned and looked at me. He was young and lean, with a mop of brown hair showing under a company baseball cap. "Yeah. Is he home?"

“He’s me.”

We started walking towards each other. He held out a slender package, too small to be anything but a letter, or maybe an optical disc of some kind. I took it from him, and signed for it.

“Have a nice day,” he said. “Ladies.” He tipped his cap to the others as he passed them, and looked back at me with a jealous smile.

“Hang on a second,” I said, getting Alyx’s attention. She stepped out in front of him, grabbing him and throwing him against the wall, and then locking his arms behind his back. Rose and Elyse came over to see what I had received.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing? Let me go!”

“In a minute,” I said. “Maybe.”

I tore the strip off the package and slipped it open. There was a piece of parchment inside, light and pale, with scrapes and scratches throughout. Dark stains ran along it in tight, formal cursive.

My Good Friend Landon,

My apologies for bowing out of the party early. I was concerned you might not be very amiable to my decision to do what I wanted, instead of what you wanted. Regardless, I did make a pact with you, and while I have made every effort to ignore my promise, I find that I am barely able to think straight over the last few days. As such, in order to assuage my own pain and continue to try to ruin your existence, I have sent this missive on a journey that will both fulfill my end, and keep you in the dark for a number of weeks.

I only do this because I care.

In any case, here are the names that I promised you

1. Who cares

2. Who cares

3. Randolph Hearst

4. Who cares

5. Who cares

Not that it matters.

Yours in brotherhood,

Gervais.

P.S. I may have exaggerated the number of demons who knew about the summoning ritual.

P.P.S You may want to sit down.

“Not that it matters?” Rose said, reading the letter over my

shoulder.

I didn't have the chance to answer her.

My stomach clenched, my body froze, my blood turning to ice. There was a sudden maelstrom in my soul, a shaking in the balance that caused me to start shivering at the force. I stumbled forward, reaching out to catch myself, only Elyse and Rose's quick reaction preventing me from falling. My eyes closed involuntarily, a dark spot finding purchase in my existence.

Diuscrucis .

A voice in my mind.

A voice that echoed in emptiness, and filled me with hopeless dread.

A voice that cursed me.

Abaddon.

* * *

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Book Six: Execution

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1

I could feel Elyse and Rose's hands on my arms, though my body slumped forward, hanging from their grip as every muscle lost rigidity. The demon's voice was soft in my mind, and at the same time the power of it was almost deafening.

"You made a promise, diuscrucis," Abaddon said. "I have no wish to return to this horrible place."

I blinked my eyes, fighting against the threatening unconsciousness.

"Can you hear me?" I asked, pushing my words inward to the place where I could feel him. It was a dark place in my soul, a place I had closed off to heal.

"Yes. I hear you. What has that demon done?" he said. "Diuscrucis, I will not be controlled."

It was the connection that allowed us to speak. The one we had forged inside the Box. It was the promise I had made, to see him destroyed so completely that his soul would no longer be tormented in Hell, or brought back to this world to even greater torment. These things had bound us, linked us together through that black

pit. The distance from Hell to where I was had been too far. Now we were together. Closer than I would have guessed.

"A summoning spell," I said. "I tried to stop it. I was too late."

He howled in my mind, the power of it nearly knocking me out.

"I can't help you if you kill me," I screamed at him.

"I hate this place. I hate this body. I hate this power. I hate. I hate."

"Landon?" Rose said. Her voice sounded as if it were a million miles away. "Landon? What's happening?"

I ignored her.

"Abaddon, I will keep my promise. I will find a way. Tell me where you are."

The demon's power eased in my head. He could have destroyed me had he wanted to. The connection was strong enough, and he had the ability. He didn't want me dead. Maybe I was the only thing in the world that he didn't want dead.

"Dark. It's still dark. I don't know. Find the demon. Make him tell you."

"I will. You have to back off. You're going to destroy me. I can't even stand up right now."

The pain lessened immediately, my blurred vision regaining focus. I found my legs, getting them under me and using them to stand. Rose and Elyse sensed my return and released their grip.

"Landon?" Rose said again. "Are you okay?"

I looked over at her, blinking a few times. There was a sudden dark hue to the world that I had never noticed before. It hung in front of me, like a shadow that was in the wrong place.

It was Abaddon. Watching me? Or just leaving me a reminder?

"Keep the promise."

I would never be free of him until I freed him from the universe.

"No," I said to Rose. "I'm not okay. None of us are okay. Abaddon is free. We have to stop him."

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2

“Free?” Rose asked. “What does that mean, Abaddon is free?”

“Nothing good,” Elyse said. “Abaddon was made in the likeness of the Beast. He has the power to destroy every living thing on Earth. The question is, how did he get out of Hell?”

“Randolph Hearst summoned him,” I said.

“Hearst?” Elyse replied. “That lowlife? He doesn’t have the power to pull something like this off.”

“Not on his own. I’m betting he had help.”

“Gervais?”

“No. Gervais wouldn’t want to share in a play like that.”

I turned my attention to the UPS delivery man. Alyx was still holding him up against the wall, the strength in her tiny hands almost comical. The man didn’t move. His face was bleached white, and he had a stain on the front of his pants.

“You son of a bitch,” I said. “What’s your motive, Gervais?”

“What?” the man said. “Look, mister, I don’t know who you think I am, but-”

“Cut the shit,” I said, moving in closer to him. “You remember

Alyx, don't you?"

She bared her teeth for me. They elongated into fangs as she did.

The man looked terrified, and he tried to run, his legs moving futilely along the ground while she held his neck.

"Judging by what Abaddon said to me, he didn't come across at full strength. I know you know what the hell is going on here. I know there's a reason you came to deliver that message personally, and I know there's a reason you let it happen in the first place. Stop playing games, or Alyx here is going to play one of her own."

The man's eyes shifted from me to Alyx, and back. Then he sighed loudly.

"Oh, fine. Have it your way, Landon."

He morphed in front of us, returning to the thin man with the curly black hair and the accent that I loved to hate.

"How did you know it was me?"

I smiled. "I didn't. I figured if I was wrong, at worst I would have scared the crap out of a deliveryman."

"Bah, I should have guessed. What did you mean, judging by what Abaddon said to me?"

"You aren't the one asking questions here. Tell me what your game is, Gervais. I know you will because you don't want to die, and you aren't powerful enough yet to prevent Alyx from killing you."

"Can you at least put me down?" he asked. "I will explain everything I know, but it would be so much nicer to sit and chat."

Alyx looked at me. I nodded. She released her grip, and Gervais fell to the ground. He reached up and rubbed at his neck.

"That's going to leave a mark," he said.

"Where have you been for the last three weeks?" I asked.

"Oh, here and there. You know how it is for demons."

"Gervais," I said.

He gave me his little French laugh and shrugged. "You defeated the Fists of God and kept your part of our bargain. You didn't need me around anymore."

"You tried to take Zheng's memories. His knowledge of how to make them."

"Well, of course, I did. That is how this works, isn't it, diuscrucis? I already told you I want to return to my former glory. I can't do that unless I have an ulterior motive. In this case, I was hoping to take our friend's memories and use them to make Fists

under my control. It was a bit of a risk, but it was win, win as long as you defeated that stupid Angel."

"And now you hacked your bonded promise so that Hearst could bring Abaddon back into this world. Why?"

"I want to use his power."

"I don't need you to tell me that part. Hearst summoned him. Hearst is in control of him. That's how it works, isn't it?"

"Yes. Mostly. There are ways." He smiled the annoying, mischievous grin that I hated so much. "There are always ways. So, let me tell you why you want to keep me around."

"Good idea," I said. "Though after the last time, I'm considering taking my chances without you."

"As well you should. But it would be a mistake. You see, I know where he summoned the demon. I know where they are keeping him. You're right when you say he isn't at full strength just yet. Except it isn't because his power didn't come across. It's because they are holding it. They don't want Abaddon free in this world. They don't want to destroy every living thing. If they did, what would they feed on? No, they have managed to contain him and his power. Now they will work to extract that power and use it to their own ends."

"You seem to know a lot about it," Rose said.

"Of course I do, my flower."

"How?"

He changed shape again, turning into a fat man with a short beard. "I can be anyone as long as they are human. This one was one of Hearst's. He had access to the Solen Intranet." He changed back to himself. "It is funny, the things that can be found on intranets these days. Such high security from outsiders, but nothing once you are inside. Especially if you're the administrator."

"So you got Hearst's secret hideout for Abaddon from the intranet?" I asked, skeptical.

"No. I got the names of a few demons who had access. That is the thing about lesser demons, Landon. They are very easy to seduce if you have the right body." He morphed into Rose's sister again, sticking out his hip and grabbing his breasts.

"You asshole," Rose said, her face twisting in anger.

"Gervais," I said, putting out a hand to hold Rose back.

"It was a little distasteful, what I had to do for the information, but worth it in the end. A demon with sexual mores is a bit too

ironic for me in any case."

"Get to the point," I said.

"Ah, yes. The point. The point is, I know where they are storing Abaddon. You do not. Therefore, you need me to help you."

"I wouldn't have if you had kept our first bargain."

"No."

"And if I make another bargain with you, you're going to renege on that, too."

"Likely."

"So why wouldn't I just find Abaddon on my own? I'm sure Hearst would be happy to tell me where he is."

"Go ahead, Landon. Go to Hearst and ask him about Abaddon. See what you get from him. Why don't you take your harem with you? I will wait here for you to come back and ask me to make a deal." He paused, looking smug. "You will come back to make a deal. I'm certain of it."

I stared at him for a good minute. It sucked to know the demon was up to something and at the same time have the niggling feeling that he had me right where he wanted me. Of any demon I had ever met, Gervais was the most accomplished manipulator of them all.

"Alyx, stay here and keep Gervais company. If he tries to do anything other than watch television, tear his throat out."

"Yes, Master," Alyx said. I looked over at her. "Yes, darling," she said instead.

"Rose, it's your call if you want to come along," I said. "Elyse, I would appreciate your company."

"Sure," Elyse said. "I'm in."

"I'll go," Rose said. "I need the practice."

"Aren't you afraid I'll steal your girlfriend while you're gone?" Gervais asked, clearly amused.

"Go ahead and try," I said. "Let's go."

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3

We took ten minutes to change from workout clothes to street threads before heading out from my apartment, taking to the streets on foot. I would grab a cab to Hearst's place soon enough, but I wanted to get Rose and Elyse up to speed first.

"Apparently, Abaddon can speak to me," I said. "Through the connection we made while I was in the Box."

"But you destroyed the Box," Elyse said. "How did the connection survive?"

"Part of our souls were both trapped. I made him a promise there, binding his soul to mine. That binding survived after I escaped. Somehow, he can speak to me and push his power through the link."

"He can send his power through the link?" Elyse said. "You mean he could kill you?"

"If he wanted to, yes. All he wants is for me to keep my promise."

"What was your promise?"

"To destroy him. Except he's already told me, he won't go

willingly. I need to earn it."

Elyse grabbed me by the arm, turning me toward her. "Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I made the deal because it was the only choice I had. It was the only way I was getting the Beast in the Box. To be honest, I didn't think I would have to make good on it already."

"Shit," Elyse said.

"Yup. So, do you have any idea how to kill an unkillable demon?"

Elyse laughed. "Not yet. One thing at a time."

"So if Abaddon wants you to kill him, why didn't he tell you where he was?" Rose asked.

"I don't think he knows. At least not yet."

"Do you even want to find him before you can destroy him? I mean, it seems to me that he's better off being held somewhere while we figure out what to do. If he's as powerful as you say, it can't be a bad thing that the power is being contained."

"It isn't a bad thing the power is contained," I said. "It is a bad thing that Randolph Hearst is containing it, especially since he has a currently unknown accomplice. I'd be happy to find out where Abaddon is and take control over his imprisonment, if that becomes an option."

"Accomplice?" Rose said. "You said it wouldn't be Gervais, but can you be sure? That demon is the slimiest little worm I've ever encountered."

"You haven't encountered enough demons," Elyse said. "Gervais is too smart to be a worm."

"And if he had a hand in summoning Abaddon, he wouldn't have come back to me. No, he needs my help for something, and in return I'm going to set him up to make a move. We probably won't figure out what that move is until it's too late."

"Then how do you know we won't end up worse off than we already are?"

"I'm linked to one of the most powerful demons that Satan ever created, and he can end me with a thought. How does it get worse than that? At least for me."

"Point taken," Rose said. "Do you know where we're going?"

We had been walking aimlessly while we chatted. It was a couple of miles to Hearst's brownstone, a distance I would normally

cover on foot if I were being sneaky. Having Abaddon's power in my soul, a constant buzz of dark energy, was killing my mood for sneakiness.

"Hearst has a brownstone on 93rd and Broadway," I said.

"Do you think he'll be home?" Rose asked.

"Probably not. His cronies will tell us where he is."

"Are you sure?"

"If they enjoy their continued existence, yes." I motioned to Elyse, who plucked a stone from her pocket. The stone could be replaced with a four-foot obsidian roman spatha with both demonic runes and angelic scripture on the blades with little more than a thought. "You brought your knives?"

Rose spread her shorter coat to show me the weapons. I was unarmed myself, figuring to let her get the experience she needed.

I whistled for a cab, waving it down and opening the door for Rose and Elyse. Then I slipped in on the front passenger side. I made eye contact with the driver, checking him for Divinity. It had been easier when I could sense them from a distance, but it had meant they could sense me, too.

"You don't want to sit in the back?" he asked, surprised. He was a younger guy in a sweater and stained jeans.

"I'm good up here," I replied. "Ninety-third and Broadway, please."

I watched his face. His eyebrow twitched just a little. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed.

"Elyse," I said. "Do you know our driver?"

The truth of it was that cabs were very common targets for both the Divine and the Nicht Creidem. They were an easy excuse to criss-cross the city, eavesdrop on conversations, and pass messages from place to place. Things like Lyft and Uber had only made that part of the Divine spy network that much more effective.

"I don't recognize him," Elyse said, leaning forward. As the daughter of the Nicht Creidem's former leader, she would have known most of their crew. "They've been recruiting outsiders lately, though. Kind of like you." She looked over at Rose, smiling.

"Is there a problem?" the driver asked, looking nervous.

"I don't know," I said. "It depends on why you know the home address of Randolph Hearst."

His eyes narrowed. "Who the hell are you?"

"Someone you don't want to screw around. Are you Nicht?"

His hand shifted on his left side. I took hold of my power, using it to pull his hand up hard enough that he cracked himself across the jaw.

"Don't," I said.

"You're him, aren't you?" he asked me, rubbing his jaw. "The one they warned me about."

"Yes. So you are Nicht Creidem?"

"They told me not to talk to you."

"There are three of us in the cab and only one of you. Considering you aren't Divine, and you don't appear to have any tats, I recommend doing what's best for your own safety. And don't even think about reaching for the gun again. You can't kill me with it anyway."

"Yeah, I'm Nicht," he said. "I only joined a few months ago. They put me on this route after I got them some good intel on a demon that was trying to smuggle a runestone. I know Hearst's address because I end up going that way a lot."

"I guess it's my lucky day," I said.

The Nicht Creidem weren't friends of mine, but we weren't total enemies, either. They wanted to destroy all Divine, and at the same time keep all of the power that was stored in the artifacts the angels and demons had created over the ages, like Elyse's sword. I killed Divine to keep humanity from being consumed by them, for better or for worse. There was some overlap there.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I told you. A cab ride up to Hearst's. I need to talk to him."

"What about?"

"He has something I'm interested in."

His ears perked up. I knew they would. "Oh?"

I smiled. "Stick around, and I might give you something to take back at the end of your shift."

"Okay, sure. Just reporting a diuscrucis sighting will get me a nice bonus. Anything else will be gravy."

"Then let's go," I said. The poor kid didn't know that I would make sure he forgot all about having seen any of us by the time he was three blocks from Hearst's residence.

The cab pulled away from the curb, cutting off a livery in the process. He was a good driver, quick and efficient, and we reached Hearst's brownstone in no time.

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4

“What’s your name?” I asked the driver when we stopped at the curb a block away from Hearst’s place.

“Joey,” he said. “Joey Lincoln.”

“Nice to meet you, Joey. Come on.”

He looked over at me. “You want me to come with you?”

“You wanted the information, didn’t you? I’m not going to sit here and tell you something you can hear for yourself.”

Joey didn’t look happy about the idea, but he unbuckled himself and climbed out of the cab. Rose got out on his side while Elyse joined me on the curb.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a whisper.

“With him?” I motioned toward Joey.

“Yes. We don’t need him. I don’t get it.”

“Abaddon is back on Earth,” I said. “I want your old team to know about it. They’ll do their due diligence on exactly how and where that happened. Best case, they’ll align with us to help me destroy him.”

“Worst case, they’ll get to him ahead of us and use his harnessed

power."

"Yup. Better them than Hearst. If the Solen family gets their mojo back with Abaddon's power behind them, it will be tough to dislodge them again."

"I assume it's also better than Gervais getting his way?"

"Definitely. Besides, we need a ride for the night. I can make him forget everything if we need him to."

"Right. I forgot about that." She smiled. "Hey, do you know if Rose likes flowers?"

"You're asking me this now? Her name is Rose; I assume so."

She punched me in the arm.

The four of us made our way down the street. As we approached Hearst's brownstone, I noticed a group of men sitting on the steps of the block of townhouses across the street. None of us were Divine, so we didn't show up on radar as out of the ordinary. Even so, the way they watched us was too intense to be typical.

"Keep an eye on the Goombas behind us," I said to Rose as we climbed the steps. She looked back at them, earning herself a whistle.

"You can't walk anywhere in this city," she said as I knocked on Hearst's door.

We waited a dozen seconds before we got an answer. A serious looking blood-sucker in a tuxedo blocked the space between door and frame, his eyes flicking over each of us.

"Ah, diuscrucis," he said. "Mr. Hearst has been expecting you."

"He has?" I said casually.

"Of course. Please, come in." He moved aside. I stepped over the threshold, and he repositioned himself to block the entrance. "Just you."

I could have made him let the others in. I still wanted the Nicht Creidem to know what was going down. It wasn't worth making a scene, especially with the guards across the street. I knew Elyse could handle them, but it just wasn't worth it.

"Sorry, I guess you should hang out here. Maybe make some friends."

Elyse rolled her eyes. "We'll be on the steps." She looked at the butler. "If those mongrels come over to bother us, they won't live long enough to have to hide from the sunrise."

"Understood," the vampire said, his eyes casting a tangible warning across to the group. "We don't want any

misunderstandings at this delicate juncture." He closed the door, separating us, and then began walking ahead of me. "Follow me."

I trailed the butler through an elegantly appointed lounge to a mahogany staircase and up to the top floor. We bypassed a simple bedroom draped in heavy, sun-blocking drapes, and made our way into a rosewood and green office.

Randolph Hearst was sitting behind the desk.

"Landon," he said with a smile, his head tilting as he tried to remember the last time he had seen me. "How long has it been?"

"Do you remember the night you had to walk home?" I asked.

His smile faded. "I thought that might have been you. Come on in, have a seat." He waved at a chair in front of the desk.

I walked over to it and sat, keeping my posture casual. There was nothing about Hearst that frightened me. He was a two-bit vampire who happened to have a good head for schemes, not unlike Gervais. His physical attributes were less than intimidating.

"I'm sure you've heard by now that I've summoned the demon Abaddon back to this world?"

It had been all of twenty-four minutes. "Why would you assume that?" I asked.

"You don't tend to drop in for tea," he replied.

"I don't like the additives. To be honest, I'm surprised to find you here. I thought you would be wherever your new pet is being held."

"I would, but I needed to be here to deal with you."

"Which meaning of deal with are you going for?" I asked.

He laughed. "You're always so sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"I held the power of a God in my hands and let it go," I said. "It did wonders for my confidence."

"I mean bargaining with you."

"Tell me where Abaddon is, and I won't kill you," I said.

"Cute, Landon. You know I'm not going to do that. And you also have to know I wouldn't have let you this close if there was any chance you could hurt me right now."

I raised an eyebrow at that, taking a quick glance around the room. The edges of demonic runes were visible beneath the rug and behind the bookshelves. They wouldn't affect me.

"How are you planning on stopping me?" I asked.

"That's part of my deal."

"I'm not following, Hearst."

The smile returned to his face. “I have Abaddon, Landon. I can do one of two things with him. One, I can keep him locked up and work on siphoning his power. Yes, my associate and I are going to use it to solidify our position in the Divine hierarchy. But what’s the harm in that? Two, I can set him free.”

“Why would you set him free?” I asked.

“Because you weren’t willing to listen to reason.”

I hated dealing with demons, and Hearst and Gervais in the same day gave me a sudden headache. “I’m listening right now.”

“The terms are simple. You let my associate and me do what we need to do, and you keep your business out of ours. In return, we keep Abaddon locked up. Or, you insist on making trouble, and I let him out.”

“I can’t let you upset the balance,” I said. “You know that.”

“I’m aware of that. Look, I don’t want to mess up this world. I like it here. What I want is to take over some of the, shall we say, assets. That’s why we summoned the demon. With his power, we can remove certain obstacles, including you.”

I was silent for a minute while I considered it. I didn’t need to kill Hearst just yet, and there was no real downside to letting Abaddon stay under house arrest while I figured out how to destroy him.

“Well? What do you say?”

“Those are all the terms? I let you kill some competition, and in return you don’t let Abaddon roam the Earth?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Indefinitely.”

“The balance,” I said.

“You can cull when you need to, but you cull from the opposition.”

“You’re buying me?” I said.

“That was the idea.”

“Who is your associate?”

“They prefer to remain anonymous at this time.”

“You know this deal is only good as long as I don’t have a way to destroy him,” I said. “Once I can, I don’t care if you set him free.”

“You can’t destroy him, Landon. At best you can send him back to Hell, and we can summon him again. You see, the summoning isn’t something you can stop, no matter what Gervais says.” He

laughed, noticing the change in my expression. “Oh, you didn’t think I knew he was trying to stick his claws in this game? I know a lot more than you think I do. So, tell me. Yes or no?”

I stood up. The motion caused Hearst to shrink back. He wasn’t as confident in the outcome as he was trying to make me believe.

“Yes,” I said. “You have a deal. If there’s a way to kill him, I’ll find it.”

“There isn’t,” Hearst said, satisfied. “The Box is gone. The Blades are gone. You can't kill him. That’s why he’s so valuable.” He stuck out his hand, using a sharp nail to open his skin and draw blood. “Shake on it?”

“You have a knife?” I asked.

He took my hand in his, cutting me with a nail. We clasped hands.

“I won’t come after you or try to stop you, so long as you keep Abaddon imprisoned,” I said. “At least until I find a way to destroy him.”

“And I won’t free Abaddon as long as you stay out of my way,” Hearst said.

I felt the slight pull of the binding, weakened by the fact that I wasn’t really Divine. I could renege if I wanted, but there was no motivation to right now. Besides, I had only promised that I wouldn’t butt in. I hadn’t said anything about Rose, Elyse, Alyx, or even Gervais.

“Good doing business with you, Landon,” Hearst said. “Now get out of my house.”

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5

“Well?” Elyse asked when I returned to the street. The vamps on the other side had vanished into the night, no longer concerned that we would give them any trouble.

“It could have been better. It could have been worse.”

“Did you kill Hearst?”

“Not yet. I made a deal with him. I leave him to his business; he keeps Abaddon locked up.”

Elyse made a sour face. “That’s why he summoned Abaddon? To get you out of the game?”

“And to make a move on the other demons. Or so he says.”

I looked over at Joey. He was listening intently, ready to bring the information back to the Nicht Creidem. The outcome of my conversation with Hearst changed my mind on that front.

“We’ll walk from here,” I said.

“Aren’t you going to tell me what’s going on?” he asked. “I understand that Hearst summoned a demon, and he’s got him locked up somewhere. What else can you tell me?”

“Nothing. Go home.”

I was in a foul mood. Why shouldn't I be? I didn't trust Hearst, despite our agreement. I especially didn't trust his unnamed associate, whoever they were. And I still had to deal with Gervais before the night was over.

"What? You said-"

"I recommend going home," Rose said, showing one of her knives.

"Fine. I'll be happy with what I've got." He made a dirt face at me and headed back to his cab.

"Is he going to remember any of this?" Rose asked.

"He'll remember driving over here and waiting. He won't remember with who, or why. Let's walk."

The three of us made the way back to my apartment on foot. I moved ahead of Rose and Elyse, giving them some space so they could talk a little more privately. Elyse asking me about flowers had proven that there was a mutual interest there though I hadn't realized they had a compatible view of sexuality. Whatever. Who was I to judge? I had bigger problems.

Hearst claimed there was no way to destroy a soul like Abaddon's, and unfortunately, I was inclined to agree. The Beast had only been destroyed after he had been captured in Avriel's Box, and only because I had managed to take his power. Even then, it had taken six blades of both demonic and heavenly power to get the job done. All of that was gone now. As far as I knew, Elyse's spatha was the most powerful artifact still on Earth, and she hadn't corrected me. I trusted her opinion on that. She had been her father's best collector, and she knew Divine trinkets like a Great Were knew how to tear out throats.

Even worse, I knew now that the whole thing with Matthias Zheng and the Fists of God was just the beginning of something bigger. When it rained, it poured, and I was about thirty seconds away from a nor'easter.

"If you two want to grab a bite, or whatever, I can handle Gervais on my own," I said once we had reached the steps of the apartment.

"And miss the fun?" Rose asked. "It's always such a pleasure dealing with that little French shit."

"I'm sensing a bit of sarcasm."

"Who? Me?" She laughed. "What do you say, El?"

Elyse reached into her pocket and tossed me her stone. "In case

you need it, Landon. I could go for some Chinese."

"Thanks," I said, catching the artifact. "I'll see you two whenever."

I waved goodbye to them, watching for a few seconds as they headed down the street together. There was good Chinese everywhere in Manhattan and an especially good place two blocks from the apartment.

I climbed the steps to my apartment, opening the door and finding Gervais sitting on my sofa, watching television, as ordered. Alyx was standing in the corner, her eyes piercing into him, her body completely still. She was the best guard I could have hoped for.

"You're back," she said when I entered, her face beaming.

She came over to me, wrapping her arms around my waist and squeezing. I felt my bad mood fading away in an instant.

"Hi, Allie," I said.

The television went off. Gervais got to his feet. "Ah, Landon. You met with Hearst, I assume?"

"You knew he would be there?" I asked.

"Of course. I knew what he wanted."

"Then you also know I don't have any use for you."

"Au contraire mon frère. You need me more than you did before."

"Do you care to explain how, exactly?"

"For one, you can only trust Hearst as far as it suits him, but you already understand that. If he aims to make a power play against bigger demons, and you can't do anything to stop it, it will only end up badly for you in the end. Especially if he manages to harness Abaddon's power. Think about it, Landon. Picture Hearst controlling the demon's shadows."

I had thought about it, every step of the way back to the apartment.

"I know," I said. "But having Abaddon loose is a worse choice. Hearst will at least be a little picky about who he ends."

"For now," Gervais said. "You know what they say about absolute power, and demons are the most easily corrupted."

"Oh, please. You're no different from Hearst, and you're already corrupted."

"True. That is the chance you might have to take. Think about it, diuscrucis. And while you're at it, think on this: I know how you

can get Abaddon away from Hearst without releasing his power on the world."

I stared at the demon. I had enough experience with the Divine to know everything he had said up until the last part was true. Hearst knew I would come after him and Abaddon the moment I felt I had the upper hand. I knew Hearst would break our deal the moment he thought he had the edge. Demons rarely held fast to their deals, as Gervais had proven.

It was all part of the balance.

The question then was whether or not to believe Gervais when he said he had a way to steal Abaddon from the vampire.

"You know how to destroy Abaddon?"

Gervais laughed. "Destroy him? Why would you want to do that?"

"I promised him I would. A bonded deal."

Gervais' amused demeanor vanished. "What?"

"You heard me. This throws a wrench in your plans, doesn't it? You're being a little too transparent right now, Gervais. I'm sure you want Abaddon's power for yourself. Knowing that I'll have to keep coming until it's gone will make things harder for you."

"Harder, but not impossible." His face changed again, returning to its general look of joyful superiority. "My plan may, in fact, meet the requirements of your bargain."

The statement piqued my curiosity, and he jumped on it.

"I see you're interested now, Landon. I knew you would be from the moment I came."

I heaved a nice sigh and rubbed my temples. I knew this was going to give me a headache. "Fine, spill it."

He smiled, a predatory smile because he knew he had me right where he wanted me. I had gotten used to being forgotten by the Divine, and since they couldn't remember seeing me to kill me, they were all trying to use me instead.

That was balance, too, I guess.

"Do you remember back at Valerix's mansion in California, when you fought the Fists of God?"

"Yeah, I remember. It was only a few weeks ago."

"Do you remember how one of the suits of armor was missing?"

"Yes," I said, playing along. "Did you take it?"

"No. But I know who did. If you recall, the armor is powered by the soul of a demon, held encased in scripture."

I could see where he was going. “How does trapping Abaddon’s soul in a Fist of God count as having fulfilled my promise?”

“Well… Okay, technically, it doesn’t.”

“It doesn’t at all.”

“Technically, it doesn’t,” he repeated. “If his soul is trapped by scripture, the link will be broken. You won’t need to keep your promise.”

I could still sense the dark pallor over the world, offering a different hue through my eyes and caused by my connection to the demon. I wondered if he could hear what Gervais was saying. I didn’t imagine he would be too happy with the idea of being trapped in yet another prison.

“And then what?” I said. “I get Abaddon into the FOG, and you steal it?”

“Yes.”

I felt my face wrinkle up at the absurdity of it all. He wasn’t even trying to be sly.

“Oh, come on now, Landon. Just because you know what I plan to do doesn’t mean you know how I would do it or that you would be able to stop me.”

“I’m trying to figure out the part where this is better than letting Hearst hold onto him. Whatever the Devil did to you before he sent you here, I still give you credit for being more underhanded and conniving than Hearst could ever be.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Seriously, Gervais. Tell me why I would team up with you to stick Abaddon in the FOG.”

He was prepared for me to say that.

“Three reasons, diuscrucis. One: as I said, the link will be broken, and you’ll be free of the demon. How long do you think he will wait for you to find a way to kill him before he decides to kill you? Two: I would still have to take the FOG from you, which leaves you with more control over your destiny. Three: you can’t destroy Abaddon. It is impossible. Which means this is the only way you get out from under him.”

I glanced over at Alyx. She was still glaring at Gervais, remaining silent and watchful. I hated that the demon was making any sense at all. I hated that his points were valid.

“One more question, then,” I said. “If you know where to get the FOG, and you know where to find Abaddon, then what do you need

me for?”

“That is a good question, with a very simple answer. I don’t have the power to get the FOG back from the one who holds it. You do.”

“And who is that?”

“Cain. The son of Satan.”

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“The son of Satan?” I asked. “Are you kidding me?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“You always look like you’re kidding. I didn’t know Satan’s son was on Earth.”

Gervais’ smile shortened to a sheepish smirk. “He isn’t.”

“Hell?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“You want me to go to Hell?”

“That is where the Fist of God is.”

“My powers don’t work in Hell.”

“Again, I say au contraire mon frère. Your Divine powers did not work on the other planes; that is true. As you like to tell me, you aren’t Divine anymore. At least not in the traditional sense. Your power is all stored within you, like a nuclear reactor. You don’t need to be on Earth to use it.”

I had never considered it that way. It was an interesting twist. Even so, I wasn’t exactly keen on the idea of going to Hell on purpose. “I’ve never been to Hell.”

“Which is why you need me. I will bring us to a demon who can open a Rift from here to there, and I will get us back.”

“What I’m saying is, I don’t want to go to Hell. I certainly don’t trust you enough to let you take me there. Besides, you told me you aren’t welcome there anymore.”

“It will be fine as long as nobody recognizes me. Believe me, Hell isn’t as bad as you might be imagining it.”

“So Dante’s Inferno was completely off the mark?”

“Not completely, but he did embellish a little bit. Besides, that was hundreds of years ago. Things change there as they do everywhere else.”

“We should go,” Alyx said, speaking up for the first time. “I can protect you. I don’t want Abaddon to kill you.”

“See, Landon. Listen to your girlfriend.”

I glanced back over at her. I knew she was only concerned for my continued existence, but she wasn’t helping. “Have you been there before?”

She shook her head. “No. It can’t be worse than living with Espanto.”

I was willing to bet it could be worse.

“I need time to think about this,” I said.

“Of course,” Gervais replied. “Don’t take too long. The longer we wait to move on Hearst, the stronger his position becomes.”

“Gervais, could you wait downstairs or something?”

“Yes. Fine. Find me outside when you’ve realized that I’m right.”

He bowed to me, blew a kiss to Alyx, and left the apartment. I could hear him whistling while he wandered to the stairwell.

“Landon, I don’t want you to die,” Alyx repeated.

“I know. I don’t want to die either. But Gervais can’t be trusted. He’s liable to bring me to Hell and leave me there. The entire thing about the Fist of God could be nothing more than a misdirection.”

“I understand. Espanto also lied often to get what he truly wanted. If you’re worried that Gervais will double-cross you in Hell, then we can go without him.”

For whatever reason, the idea of going to Hell without Gervais almost made me more nervous than going with him. At the very least he was an experienced guide. If I could trust him even the smallest amount, I wouldn’t have to make this kind of decision.

“Who do you know that can guide us?” I asked.

“Espanto knew a lot of demons. One of them was a fiend named

Damien. He traveled between the worlds quite often."

"Why does he go back and forth? Is he some kind of messenger?"

"Something like that. He transports artifacts from Hell to Earth. Runed blades, mainly."

"A Divine arms dealer?"

"That's a good way to put it."

"Can we trust him?"

She smiled mischievously. "You know you can't fully trust any demon. He's weak enough that we can keep him in line, and we can give him enough incentive to stay as honest as any fiend can."

"What kind of incentive?"

"Me."

"What?"

"I'll promise to sleep with him if he helps us. I saw the way he looked at me when Espanto visited him. He'll do it."

I froze in place. It was hard for me to see Alyx as a demon. She was so sweet to me and so innocent about how normal human life worked. It was incredibly endearing and occasionally shocking. Despite what Espanto had put her through, and could continue to put her through if he got close enough that his brand put her back under his control, she had a freeness of both sexuality and violence that made me uncomfortable. Maybe my human morals were off-kilter with the reality of the situation. I didn't care.

"No," I said. "I'm not trading any part of you."

She didn't seem disappointed, but she was confused. "Why not?"

"You aren't a thing to barter. You're a living creature. You have a soul."

"A demonic soul."

"I don't believe souls are good or evil. Or if they are, I believe they can change from one to the other. You get to choose what kind of soul you have. You're protective of me because you don't want me to be hurt. I'm protective of you because I want you to be able to make that choice with a full understanding of what it means."

"But you said you don't love me. Why do you want to keep something you don't love to yourself?"

"I don't want to keep you to myself. It's your choice to be here or not. Just because I don't love you doesn't mean I want to see you make decisions that will hurt you. I don't love all of the humans who are out there. I still protect them from the Divine because I

believe in their freedom to choose to be good or evil."

She pursed her lips, considering my statement. "I think you do love me," she said at last.

I didn't say anything. Most of our conversations seemed to go this way.

"It is my choice to stay here with you. I will never change my mind. It's also my choice if I want to make a deal with Damien."

She threw me again, turning my words against me.

"I'm asking you not to. We can find some other way to pay him. You're too valuable to spend like currency."

She smiled, her entire posture melting into something entirely different. It was all I could do to keep my heart from pumping right out of my chest, and my arousal was impossible to prevent.

"I love you," she said, noticing my reaction. She was doing it on purpose.

"I know," I said.

In her own way, she did. I didn't feel the way I needed to use those words. I didn't deny that she was incredibly sexy, in part because of how ferociously protective she was over me. I didn't deny that I had come to desire her more and more over the last three weeks. But I was still a virgin because that wasn't a good enough reason for me. There was a huge gap between love and lust that would have to close.

"I'm going to head up to the roof for some air," I said. "I'm not taking Damien out of the equation, but if we need to pay him, we'll find some other way to do it, okay?"

She hesitated for a moment and then nodded. "Okay."

I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. She nuzzled her face against me.

"Keep an eye on Gervais for me?"

"Of course, Mast… Landon."

I left her in the apartment, moving to the fire escape and climbing it to the roof. Once there, I pulled my cell from my pocket. I needed a little more advice than the people around me could offer.

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“I appreciate that you trusted me with this, Signore,” Dante said.

“I know we’ve had our differences over the years. This one is too big for me to manage on my own.”

We were standing together on the top of my building, standing near the edge and looking down at the street below. When Dante wasn’t writing notes of our conversation down on a small pad he had brought; I could tell he was keeping his eyes on Gervais, who was standing in front of the deli smoking a cigarette and looking smug as usual. I was switching my attention between the demon, the poet, and Alyx, who was sitting with her legs dangling from the fire escape and keeping close tabs on everything.

“Well, of course, you know the last thing I think you should do is trust that demon,” he said. “That one fiend should cause so much strife among the Divine is an offense to the balance.”

“To be honest, all of his schemes haven’t come to that much. I mean, he had potential with Sarah, but Josette messed him up on that angle.”

“I would argue that Sarah tripped him up herself. People make

their decisions in life. Even though her mother was an Angel, she could have decided to seek evil."

"I'll accept that. So, what do you think about Gervais' plan?"

"I'll have to consult Alichino about the specifics, but on the surface I believe it would be possible. There is no way to say for certain, however. Your situation is unlike any I have encountered before. Going to Hell, on the other hand? Signore, you do not want to do this thing."

"I've already established what I don't want to do. But I might need to do it. Is it really that bad? Part of the reason I called you was for a straight answer."

"It has been many years since I was there last. Heaven and Hell are a reflection of humanity as much as anything else. For me, this representation took the form of circles, as I wrote about in the Inferno. You have seen for yourself in Purgatory how things change based on perception. Both Heaven and Hell are no different."

"So everyone experiences it differently?"

"In a sense. What will make Hell dangerous for you is that every being there is a demon. You can trust no one, and they will all be seeking to take advantage of you. Every last one, in one way or another. You must also steel your will against the torments you will see, and remember that these souls are cast down for a reason."

I knew that would be the hardest part. To see people suffering and recognize that it was deserved.

"What about Cain, and Lucifer himself?"

"You will not see Lucifer. He remains in his palace at all times, though his consciousness is everywhere."

"So he can see me?"

"He knows every soul that arrives in his realm. He might be amused by your presence, and he might entertain himself by watching you. As you are a visitor and not one of the damned, he will not intervene in any way. Cain, on the other hand, is dangerous. Very dangerous. I will be honest with you, Signore. I don't know if you can defeat him if it came to a battle of power. You may not have kept enough of it to battle the son of Lucifer."

"I don't want to fight him. I want to sneak in, grab the FOG, and go."

"That may be difficult considering the size of the armor."

"I should be able to carry it. So, you agree with Alyx that I should cut Gervais out of this?"

He nodded. He looked energized to be involved again. “Yes. Even if the demon doesn’t plan to leave you there, you will be better off with a guide you can control.”

“I still need him to lead me to Abaddon’s prison.”

“I will work on that, Signore. With Alichino’s help, we may be able to determine the location of the demon. Any prison that is strong enough to hold him will have made waves somewhere.”

I put my eyes on Gervais again. He was watching a woman who had just come out of the deli. She was black, well-dressed, with a large chest and a plump rear. He dropped his cigarette butt, stamped it with his foot, and began walking along the street behind her.

“What do I do with him?” I asked, switching my attention to Dante.

Dante rubbed his chin. “Hmm… I’ll speak to Alichino about that as well. Perhaps we can fit two souls into the Fist of God.” He smiled as though he had made a joke. He looked too hopeful to be kidding. “Leave him be for now. You may need him in case we can find no other option. Have your people keep an eye on him, and I will try to help you do so as well.”

“Okay. If you learn anything useful, and I’m still in Hell, you can trust Rose or Elyse.”

I looked back to the street. Both Gervais and the woman were gone. I knew he had to feed to keep his strength up, and I didn’t like having to let him.

“I believe I can trust Rose. The Nicht Creidem are only a little better than the Divine.”

“Dante,” I said, turning back toward him with the intention of starting an argument about Elyse.

Of course, he was already gone.

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I went back down the fire escape, meeting Alyx there.

"He is feeding," she said. "I can smell the blood and sex from here."

"Don't remind me," I replied. "Come on, we're leaving."

She pushed off with her legs, easily jumping into a stand. "Are we going to Damien?"

"We will, yes. We need to connect with Rose and Elyse first."

"Okay."

I looked her over. She was wearing short shorts that revealed the crease between her behind and her legs, and a tight halter top that did nothing to hide the shape of her breasts below it. I knew she wasn't dressed that way to be overtly sexual. It was the way Espanto had always wanted her to look and she didn't know any better. I'd tried to explain the different kinds of clothes to her, and she sort of understood, but being able to change into a massive werewolf and shred anyone or anything that offended you to pulp made the point moot under most circumstances.

"Go change into something more suited to traveling," I said. "We

don't want to attract a lot of attention, and you will in that."

She looked down, oblivious to the wardrobe choice. "If you say so. What look are we going for?"

I had gotten her clothing of every kind to see what else she liked. She had tried it all and rejected everything that covered too much skin. She didn't like the feeling of cloth on her body, maybe because of her heightened senses. I think if it were completely up to her she would have disregarded modesty altogether.

"Let's go with professional and casual," I said, pushing a bit of power to morph my own clothes into a pair of jeans and a sport coat.

"Mini-skirts are so constricting on my legs," she said.

"You have pants."

"Pants make me look like a male."

"Shorts are out," I said.

"I can choose what I wear," she said.

She was still playing with me over what I had said.

"Allie, we don't have time for games."

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Fine. I'll be right back."

She climbed into the window and vanished. I remained on the fire escape, looking up now instead of down. It was a clear night, though the city's pollution left counting stars a dicey proposition.

"Diuscrucis."

Abaddon's voice cut through me, and I stumbled forward, grabbing the railing before I found myself plummeting into more pain.

"Abaddon," I said internally. "What's happening?"

"I am not happy."

"Can you ease off a little?"

The pain subsided. Mostly.

"I don't blame you. Do you know where you are?"

"It is dark. Everything is dark. My power. They take it. It hurts. I do not like pain, diuscrucis."

"I'm working on it. It's only been a couple of hours."

"Hours? It feels like ages. You must free and destroy me, diuscrucis. Do not linger."

"Trust me, I'm not. Ending a demon like you isn't quite like making an omelet."

"I don't understand."

I should have known he wouldn't. At least now I knew he

couldn't hear what I heard.

"It isn't easy. I've got a lead. I'll update you if it bears fruit."

"What does fruit have to do with my pain? Speak clearly."

"I'll tell you when I find a way. Except you told me you won't go without a fight."

"Yes. I cannot. I want to end, yet do not want to die."

It was an odd statement. At the same time, I knew exactly what he meant. "I've been there. I'm doing my best, I promise."

"Very well, diuscrucis. I will be waiting."

The sense of him shrank back once more. I heard a rustling behind me, and I turned around to see Alyx standing naked in front of me, holding a different outfit in each hand.

"Which one do you prefer?" she asked, a coy smile on her face.

Again, her actions were intentional. She could have put her underwear on to ask the question. My body reacted to the sight of her, and I stammered out an answer. "That one," I said, pointing at the tweed in her left hand.

She nodded. "I like that one, too."

She walked over to the sofa, put them both down, and began dressing. She did it slowly, deliberately, each motion smooth and languid. It was more comparable to a jaguar than a wolf, and I had to pull my eyes away from her.

Demons.

She joined me on the fire escape a minute later, leaning up to kiss me on the cheek. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No you aren't," I replied.

She laughed. "I'm trying to be what you call behaved, but you are my mate. We should be making pups. I can see how much your body wants mine."

"If that was the only criteria, we'd be on the floor together right now."

"We are mates. I am yours. That is the criteria." She took my hand, trying to pull me toward the window. I had to use my power to pull back and remain in place.

"Allie," I said, using my I-think-you're-adorable-but-no voice. She fake-pouted for a few seconds, dropping my hand.

"I had to try," she said.

I reached out with my power, using it to pull the window closed. Then I scanned the street for signs of Gervais. "Do you know where Gervais is?"

She lifted her head slightly to sniff for him. “An alley, four blocks east. Why?”

“I don’t want him to see us leave. Come on.”

I vaulted the railing and dropped, using my power to land gently on the ground. Alyx followed me down, her legs bending slightly as she hit the ground.

“Rose and Elyse are over at Cheng’s.”

Alyx wrapped her arm around mine. She looked great in the tweed miniskirt and short-sleeved blazer.

“What are we waiting for?” she asked.

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We found Rose and Elyse in a fairly secluded corner booth. I half-expected that we would be interrupting a semi-public makeout session.

Instead, Elyse had her arm around Rose, and Rose was crying.

“What’s going on?” I asked, sliding into the other side of the booth with Alyx.

“Where are you going?” Elyse asked, noting Alyx's outfit.

“You probably don’t want to know,” I said. “Rose, are you okay?”

Rose reached up and wiped at her tears. “Your timing sucks, Landon. You should have gotten here five minutes ago.”

“Why?”

“That was before I asked Elyse what she had to do to become immune to the Divine.”

I glared at Elyse. “I thought we weren’t telling her yet?”

“It isn’t her fault,” Rose said, defending Elyse. “I wouldn’t let it go. I should have, but you know how stubborn I am.”

“Since the cat’s out of the bag, what do you think?” I asked. It

was insensitive, I know. I was in a hurry.

"About drinking the blood of angels?" Rose looked sick for saying it. "Forget it. If that's what it takes, I'm not doing it. I can hold down the fort, or do some investigative work for you, or just pull the trigger and pray. I won't desecrate God like that." The thought made her tears come harder.

"Rose, I know it's a bit of a shock, and that I'm going to sound like a total jerk here, but you've already helped me kill an archangel. It's a little late not to desecrate God. I told you when we met what knowing me meant."

"There's a difference between killing an angel and drinking their blood," she said. "Drinking something's blood is like being a demon. It's like being Gervais."

I softened my voice. "I know, Rose. And I'm sorry. I wish we could power you up another way. I used to be able to give over some of my power. I can't do that anymore. If you're against it, I respect that. It will increase your chances of dying young."

"I'd rather die young." She wiped her tears again. There was a half-eaten plate of sashimi in front of her. "Do you want it? I lost my appetite."

I passed. Alyx didn't. She grabbed the plate and starting eating.

"So, where are you going?" Rose asked.

"I already said-"

"That we probably don't want to know. I do want to know. I don't think anything you tell me could be worse than what I've already heard today."

"We're going to Hell."

Rose's face turned white. "What?"

"Hell," I repeated.

"The Hell?"

"It's the only one I know of. Yes. Elyse, I need you to keep tabs on Gervais for me. I know that can be hard to do, but I suspect he'll hang around and wait for me to come back. Rose, Dante is going to be trying to find an alternate means to assist with the Abaddon problem. I told him to contact you if he finds anything. Also, if you want to do some digging of your own, I'm sure it would help."

They both stared at me, dumbstruck.

"Okay," I said, breaking the silence. I reached into my pocket and grabbed the stone, holding it out toward Elyse.

"No," she said. "Keep it. You're going to need it."

“Elyse, the sword is yours.”

“And I want you to keep it for now. Landon. Hell?”

“I know it sounds bad, but I’ll have Alyx with me, and my power will work there. It’s not like I’m going to be a defenseless soul. Besides, Abaddon is here, and that’s a lot scarier than some fire and brimstone.”

“Which is another good point. What if Hearst decides to set Abaddon free? Or what if he uses the demon’s power against people instead of other demons?”

“Do you have your cell?”

Elyse dug it out of her pants pocket and handed it to me. I pulled out mine. “I’m putting Obi and Sarah’s numbers in, along with Alichino’s. If you need extra help, call Obi first and fill him in. If you’re really desperate, call Sarah.”

I didn’t want to involve Sarah in anything having to do with fighting the Divine, but if it were a choice between that and Armageddon, it was worth the risk.

“I don’t like this,” Elyse said as I handed her phone back.

“I’m not in love with it either,” I said. “It has to be done.”

We all sat in the booth and stared at one another for an awkward moment. Elyse started sliding out of the seat at the same time I did.

“Be careful,” she said, hugging me.

“Are you kidding? I have the easy part compared to you.”

She forced the laugh for me.

Rose took Elyse’s place a moment later. “Landon, I want you to know. I’m not giving up. I still want to be part of the fight. I just-”

“I understand,” I said, interrupting. “To be honest, I wouldn’t do it either.”

She seemed surprised by that. “You wouldn’t? Not even to save humankind from extinction?”

I was about to say I wouldn’t. The extinction part gave me pause. “I cried the first time I killed an angel. If you were asking the same question to that version of me, I would say no without hesitation. Now? I’ve seen too much, done too much to rule out anything.”

She smiled, offering a hug. I held her tight for a moment.

“Thank you, Landon.”

“You said that like you aren’t going to see me again.”

“No. I know I will. Hell can’t hold someone like you.”

I broke the embrace, turning to Alyx.
“Are you ready?”
“Yes, darling.”
“Let’s go.”
“Give ‘em hell,” Elyse said, her smile more honest this time.
“Funny,” I replied, my smile equally sincere.

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10

We were at the airport an hour later, waiting for a flight to Denver, Colorado. While I was as inconspicuous as they came, Alyx's power stood out like a sore thumb to any Divine that happened to be in the area.

There were always Divine stationed at airports, especially one as busy as JFK. We had barely made it through security when we picked up a tail in the form of a pair of angels. They were pretty good at following us, too, managing to stay behind without notice until we had reached the terminal.

That was when they got too close.

"There are two angels watching us," Alyx said, leaning in close and rubbing her face against my ear. "I can smell them."

"Where?" I asked.

"Behind us and to the left. In the food court."

"Are they moving in, or just sitting?"

"Sitting right now. Do you want me to kill them?"

I patted her hand. "Let's not be so quick to go for the throat. Wait here, I'm going to talk to them."

She growled softly, leaning back in her seat and pouting. I stood up, stretched, and began heading back toward the food court, scanning the people at the tables. I spotted them a moment later, a male and female, middle-aged. The male had a large stomach and a sour expression. The woman was as plain as plain could be.

They didn't notice me noticing them. Their eyes were tight on Alyx. Two angels wouldn't dare go after a Great Were on their own, and even if they did I wasn't worried about Alyx's safety. I was more interested in finding out if they knew about Abaddon.

At least, I was until I noticed that the terminal was beginning to clear out.

For no good reason.

I looked back at Alyx. Humans had a subconscious, uncanny ability always to clear out of areas where Divine were about to clash before the clash happened. If anyone was going to start a riot, I expected it would be her.

Except she was still sitting calmly in her chair, twirling a strand of hair and yawning.

I scanned the hallway further down toward the entrance. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the people were headed away from us.

Ten others were coming the wrong way.

Shit.

I reached into my pocket, finding the stone. I hadn't expected I would need the weapon so soon after leaving Rose and Elyse. By the show of force, I could only guess that the Heavenly Host had heard about Abaddon and had put their army on high alert.

Any time a Great Were showed up anywhere was a cause for high alert, and with things turning sour out there, I had a bad feeling they were going to turn sour in here.

I turned back to the first two angels. They were on their feet now, and they had noticed I wasn't abandoning ship like the rest of the rats.

"Call off the brute squad," I said to them. "She's with me."

"With you?" Plain Jane asked. She eyed me curiously. "You don't have an aura. Are you her plaything?"

"Not exactly," I replied. "We don't want any trouble."

I glanced back toward the oncoming squadron of angels. I was certain Alyx had noticed them though she continued to play with her hair like it was no big thing.

“A Great Were in an airport is always trouble,” Sourpuss said.

It might have had to do with the fact that a demon like Alyx could board a plane, tear it to shreds at thirty-thousand feet, and survive the fall. Or it might have been tense nerves over Abaddon. There was only one way to find out.

“Don’t you have bigger problems to deal with?” I asked.

“What do you know about it?” Jane replied.

“More than you, I would guess.”

“So you’re in league with Hearst?”

“I didn’t say that.”

The larger group had reached Alyx. They positioned themselves around her. The funny thing about angels was that they couldn’t attack first. It was against their rules to be the instigator, and would cause whoever started it to fall.

“Who are you?” Sourpuss asked.

“You know who I am,” I replied. “And I can tell you that now is not a good time for you to lose any more karma.”

The two angels looked at one another, and then back at me, finally getting the hint.

“Diuscrucis,” they said together.

I felt a wave of heat behind me. By the time I turned around the petite, adorable, sexy girl Alyx had been replaced with the massive, furry, massive were Alyx.

“Alyx, no,” I said, trying to stop her before things got out of hand.

I was too late. With a snarl, she leaped onto one of the angels, using her claws to tear his sword arm off before he could draw his blade.

The other angels responded quickly, getting their swords in hand. It would only take one blessed blade breaking her skin to kill her. It was a good thing she had a tough hide.

The two angels blew past me, rushing to aid their brethren. I took hold of my power, reaching out and yanking them back. They fell on the ground ahead of me, confused by the sudden loss of momentum. I pushed off against the ground, leaping forward while summoning the spatha, landing next to Alyx just in time to parry a particularly violent thrust.

“Alyx, what the hell?” I asked.

She had already downed the first angel and was reaching out for another.

“You didn’t hear what that one said to me,” she growled, wrapping her massive claw around the angel.

I sidestepped a lunge, bringing the spatha up and around, knocking the angel’s blade away and slicing him with the scripted side. The wound would hurt, but it would heal.

“Don’t kill any more of them,” I said, pushing another back with my power.

“But, Landon-”

“No. Please, Alyx. I need you to help me, not hinder me.”

The words cut into her more deeply than a blessed sword could. She shifted back into girl form, the action confusing the angels and breaking the flow of the fight.

“I’m sorry,” she said, only slightly louder than a whisper. She had tears in her eyes.

“Hold up,” I said to the assembly of seraphim. “Everybody just calm down.”

“Who are you?” one of them asked. He was kneeling next to Alyx’s initial victim and pouring holy water on the wound. He would be fine in a day or two.

“Diuscrucis,” Plain Jane said. “Step aside. She attacked us. We have a right.”

“She said that one was taunting her.”

“It is allowed,” Sourpuss said.

The statement reminded me of Adam. “Is that what this is coming to? Since when does Heaven care more about starting a fight than taking the higher ground? Since when is it acceptable to bend the rules to make them what you want them to be? She wasn’t threatening you or anybody in this airport. If you were concerned about the flight, you could have bought a ticket.”

“The demons have summoned one of their most powerful souls back to this world, diuscrucis,” Jane said. “Surely, you of all people understand what that means for us.”

“That’s not an excuse for overreacting. What did you expect to happen here? You kill one Great Were and lose ten of your own in the process? How is that going to help your cause?”

None of the angels said anything.

“Besides that, you should know something like this would get me involved. I’m on the case, and I appreciate you not trying to kill my friends.”

“We didn’t know she was with you,” Sourpuss said. “We didn’t

know you were you."

"If you had given me a minute, instead of insulting-"

"She's a demon," the instigator said, back on his feet. His lost arm was already beginning to heal. "A powerful one. It doesn't matter who she is with. She needs to die."

"Saul, be quiet," Jane said. "I'll speak to you about this later."

The angel glowered at Alyx. "I meant what I said."

She bared her teeth, taking a step toward him. I put my hand on her shoulder, and she stopped.

"Enough," I said. "You know Abaddon is back in this world. You can help me stop him from destroying the balance, or you can start fights with my people and force me to kill you."

Jane nodded, still glaring at Saul. "I'm not prepared to help you, diuscrucis. However, we won't stand in your way. Let's go."

She led the angels away, leaving us alone as the mortals began to return to the area as if nothing had ever happened.

"I'm sorry," Alyx said again, looking at me with big eyes.

"Forget about it," I replied. "They shouldn't have been pushing you. What did he say, anyway?"

"It doesn't matter now. I'll do better next time, I promise."

I smiled and gave her a hug. "I know you will."

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The rest of the trip to Denver was relatively uneventful. Alyx slept most of the way, her head resting on my chest while she snored in a cute mini-growl. I spent the entire time awake, trying to get my mind right for the bigger and more important trip. It took a lot of effort to pep-talk myself into not freaking out about the idea of Hell. I had been trapped in the Box with the Beast, who was a bigger, badder version of Lucifer, and I had come out victorious. I shouldn't have been as nervous as I was.

It was the history, the fear ingrained since I was a child by my somewhat religious mother, that was psyching me out. Sure, the Box had been a scary place, but it had also been ever-changing, control of it usurped by the power of the Beast. Hell was static in comparison. Charis had been my first true love, but she had never been as well-suited to the environment of the Box as Alyx was to Hell. Great Weres were uncommon on any plane.

After we had landed, I rented a car and drove us downtown. The sleep had lifted Alyx's spirits, dampened somewhat after the altercation with the angels. She pointed at the buildings, made

comments about the people she saw, and acted more like an enthusiastic tourist than a powerful demon.

“Where do we find Damien?” I asked as we cruised along Speer Boulevard.

“His master owns a gentleman’s club up in Westminster.”

A gentleman’s club. Of course. Demons tended to go for vice to fuel their own.

“His master? I thought he was his own fiend.”

“No. He’s a dealer for another fiend named Cabal. Cabal is about two steps below archfiend. Damien’s two steps lower than that.”

“So, do we talk to Damien directly or do I need to go through Cabal.”

“We’ll go to Damien. If he hasn’t heard from Espanto, he won’t know that I’ve left him. I can convince him I’m on a job.”

“Did Espanto send you on a lot of jobs alone?”

“He was always nearby when he did. He never wanted to risk me being able to break his bond. He’d stay in a hotel and send me out on his errands.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t handle Damien himself.”

“Because of the club? Espanto didn’t want women who would sell their bodies like that. It was the power that turned him on. He loved having control over it.”

“I don’t need any more details,” I said. She had already told me some of the things the demon had forced her to do. “What if Damien knows you left?”

“Since you didn’t like my idea of payment, he’ll probably make us go to Cabal. We’ll negotiate with Cabal, and he’ll send us on our way. Then he’ll tell Espanto where I am and get paid again.”

It was predictable demon behavior. “Which is why we’ll find an alternate Rift to travel through and come out somewhere else,” I said.

“Damien won’t like that.”

“I think you can convince him.”

“I thought-“

“With your claws.”

She laughed.

We made the trip up to Westminster. It was nine in the evening, and whatever action took place in the club would be in full swing. I was surprised to find a line outside the place, a decent sized building with no windows and a simple sign. A pair of large, human

bouncers was controlling the crowd.

"I'm not used to seeing lines for a nudie bar," I said.

"Cabal gets some of the best talent from the industry," Alyx said. "He's got a lot of connections."

I parked the car, looking back at the assembled crowd and then at the two of us. The business casual would have to go. I reached out and put my hand on the Alyx's miniskirt at the top of her thigh. She put her hand on top of mine and held it while I morphed the tweed to something a little more slinky and moved on to her blouse and jacket.

I changed my clothes into a sharper, more expensive looking suit.

"You're up," I said as we climbed from the car.

She took my hand, leading me through the crowd to the front of the line. The bouncers wouldn't see her as Divine. To them, she was as human as anyone else in the cue, except that she was important.

"Is Damien here?" she asked. I could hear people on the line bitching about me getting to cut in because I had a "hot chick" with me.

"Alyx. It's been a while. Who's your friend?"

"This is Baylor. One of Espanto's newest acquisitions. He's just here to help me carry."

"Sure. Sure." The bouncer stepped aside. "Damien is backstage. If you'd come a couple of hours later, you would have missed him."

"Thanks, Ronnie," Alyx said, guiding me past the heavies. The other guests were still complaining, and I could hear Ronnie tell them to stuff it as we moved through a foyer and out into the club.

I wanted to ignore the fact that I was in a strip joint. I wanted to pretend I was somewhere a little more clandestine, like a library. It was tough to do when the girls were everywhere. Cleaning tables, carrying trays, tending the bar. They were all dressed in something slinky, and most of it was either topless or transparent. I could feel my face burning, embarrassed for being here.

Then there was the stage. There were three girls up on it, not even a thong to share between them. They were undulating and grinding against one another. I only spared them a two-second glance before I looked away.

Sometimes I really hated dealing with demons.

"How do we get backstage from here?" I asked, having to raise my voice over the din of dance music.

“Follow me,” Alyx said. I expected her to be amused by my modesty. Instead, she seemed bothered that I was being subjected to the display. Was that progress?

We made our way off the left of the stage to a guarded and locked door. The guard recognized Alyx and slid his access key across the reader before we had even arrived. We went through without slowing.

I thought the floor of the club was bad. Behind it was even worse. There were private booths here, open out into the corridor we walked along, where patrons were receiving special attention from the dancers. I was sure most of it was illegal, and I did my best to ignore the sights, sounds and smells as we cleared that area and reached the offices behind.

“Are you okay?” Alyx asked.

I nodded. “I just hope Hell is nothing like this.”

We kept walking until we reached a heavier steel door. Alyx pushed it open, and we descended some steps, heading down into a sub-basement below the place.

I could hear voices ahead of us as we entered a dingy, earthy corridor. Alyx came to stop.

“Cabal is in with Damien. Damn it.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Did you come up with another way to pay for the trip?”

“Yeah.” Elyse wasn’t going to like it.

“Then let’s get this done.” She started forward again.

The voices gained in volume as we drew nearer to another door, this one made of stone and covered with demonic runes. One of the voices was a booming bass, the other equally loud and scratchy. The two demons were so busy yelling at one another that they didn’t notice immediately when Alyx pulled the door open.

I didn’t know which demon was which. They were both around six feet and thick with muscle, dressed in silk shirts and nice pants. They were arguing in the center of a ring of runed stones on a dirt floor. A Hell Rift.

“How many times I got to tell you to keep your hands off?” the deep-voiced one was saying to the other. “Girls start getting hurt in my club, they tell their friends, and before you know it I can’t get any decent talent in here.”

“She came on to me. What was I supposed to do?”

“You say every girl I bring in comes onto you.”

“Well, they-“ His eyes flicked over to Alyx, and he stopped talking. The other one noticed a moment later.

“Alyx,” he said. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“You’re a terrible liar, Cabal,” Alyx said, identifying the demons for me.

“Okay. Truth is you’re the last thing I wanted to see in my joint. Your husband is looking for you.”

“He isn’t my husband,” Alyx said.

“Whatever. I don’t care about that stuff. I do care that he told me he would burn everything I own if you turned up and I let you walk.”

“Like you could stop me?”

Cabal smiled. “Yeah, I didn’t tell your husband that, not that he would have listened anyway. Just walk and I’ll pretend I never saw you.”

“Sorry, I can’t. My new master wants to hire you.”

His eyebrows raised at that statement. So did mine. How many times did I have to tell her not to call me master?

“Oh,” he said, noticing me for the first time. “You aren’t talking about this thing, are you? It isn’t even strong enough to have an aura.”

I didn’t like the way he called me “it.” I gathered my power, using it to throw him to the wall and pin him there. Damien tried to come to his master’s defense, but Alyx stepped in front of him, turning one of her hands into a large claw.

“Have a little respect for the diuscrucis,” she said.

His eyes widened, and he looked at me a little closer. “You’re him?” he asked.

I let him go. “Yes.”

“You have a knack for getting mixed up with interesting individuals,” Damien said.

“Better him than Espanto,” Alyx said. “That’s why I’m not afraid of that asshole. I’m under Landon’s protection. He’s my true mate.”

I could see the jealousy in Damien’s eyes. Cabal just laughed. “How come Espanto didn’t tell me you ran off with the diuscrucis?”

It was because he wouldn’t have remembered how Alyx left. Only that she had.

“I need a ride, and a guide,” I said.

“From me?” Cabal asked. “Where to?”

“You’re standing in it.”

He laughed again, harder. “You want to go to Hell?”

“Want? No. Need? Yes.”

“Why would I help you get there?”

“I can pay.”

“Oh? What do you have?”

I clenched my teeth while I removed the stone from my pocket and summoned the sword. “You can have this after we get back.”

“Before you go,” Cabal said, his eyes lighting up. “That thing is legendary.”

“No. I might need it while I’m there.”

“What if you don’t come back?”

“I will.”

He considered for a few seconds. “Deal. Damien was about to go out on a run. You can tag along. He’ll get you where you need to go, and if you survive he’ll bring you back.”

“Fair enough. Don’t even think about double-crossing me. I’m not an easy one to get rid of.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Cabal said. “I like my head attached to my neck. You want to seal it in blood?”

“Not necessary. I’ll take your word.”

“You have it. Damien, make sure the diuscrucis here comes back alive. I want that sword.”

“Yes, master,” Damien said.

“If Espanto comes back here, you haven’t seen me,” Alyx said.

“Of course not,” Cabal replied. “Step aside and we’ll get you on your way.”

We cleared the circle. Damien vanished from the room while Cabal drew some additional runes on the wall by slicing open his hand with a knife and dipping his finger in the blood.

“What are those for?” I asked.

“I’m binding Alyx to this Rift,” he said. “I can’t have you deciding to take another path back here and getting away without giving up either her or the sword.”

“Nobody said anything about this.”

“You don’t want to go; you don’t have to.”

“Give me a break, Cabal. We both know when we come back Espanto is going to be here waiting for us.”

He shrugged. “Chance you got to take, diuscrucis. I thought you were a tough guy?”

I glared at him. Alyx squeezed my arm and leaned in to whisper

to me. “It’ll be okay.”

“No, it won’t be,” I whispered back. “If we come back through that Rift, and Espanto is here, you’ll be back under his control. I can’t fight both of you alone.”

“You can take a different path.”

“And leave you with him? Not a chance.”

“Won’t you come to save me again?”

“Of course I would, but-”

“But what?”

My mind flashed back to the meat locker in China, to the sight of Espanto’s brand and Alyx’s story about how he used her. It wasn’t an uncommon thing amongst demons, and I had become numb to it most of the time. Not with Alyx. I couldn’t stand the thought of his hands on her body.

“If I don’t do this, then I’m hindering you again,” she said.

Damn. Why did my words always get me in trouble?

“Well?” Cabal asked.

Alyx pulled away from me before I could respond, using a claw to cut her other hand open. Cabal dipped a finger in it and finished the rune. It burst into flame, and I could feel the demonic energy pass between the circle and Alyx, binding her to it.

I suddenly felt guilty for not doing more to stop her.

“Even if you take another Rift, she’ll be passed here through the Nether,” Cabal said. “There’s no way around it, so you can either come with or leave her behind. Either way I get paid.”

Damien returned to the room, three more fiends trailing behind him. They arranged themselves around the circle with Cabal. Apparently, the fiend wasn’t strong enough to activate the Hell Rift on his own.

“Damien, don’t forget to make the pickup. This isn’t just a sightseeing tour.”

“Of course, Master,” Damien replied.

The four fiends knelt, putting their hands on the stones and whispering. A moment later, a ring of fire enveloped the edge of the circle.

“Let’s go, diuscrucis,” Damien said. “Ladies first.”

Alyx looked back at me, her eyes apologetic, before stepping into the Rift and vanishing.

A moment later, I did the same.

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12

The trip between Earth and Hell was instant. One second I was in Cabal's subterranean lair, and the next I was much, much further down.

Of course, that wasn't an accurate description of where Hell existed. At all. It felt like an eternity since Josette had explained the physics to me. My version was that each realm was in its own plane, stacked together like a hamburger. Purgatory was the cheese melted on top of the mortal realm while Heaven and Hell were the buns. From what Cabal had said, I guess there was another layer called the Nether. That would be the mayo, or the mustard, depending on how they build burgers wherever you happened to be from.

In any case, we had arrived. I tested my power before I even considered looking around, not wholly convinced that it would translate.

It did.

"Are you okay?" Alyx asked, taking my arm again.

"I am right now. I'm not thrilled about what will happen when

we're done here."

"I'm sorry, Landon. There was no other way. You need to do this."

"I wish I didn't."

I finally noticed our surroundings. If the walls of the room hadn't been darker and clear of runes, I wouldn't have known we had gone anywhere.

"I have to say, if this is Hell, I'm a little underwhelmed," I said.

"Please," Damien said. "You see one tiny little crap room, and you think you know anything?"

He smiled, showing a mouth full of sharp teeth that he didn't have topside.

Then he tried to hit me.

I was caught by surprise. Even so, I still managed to shift my feet, grab his punch, and keep going with his momentum, throwing him hard into the wall. He hit it with a grunt, and then turned and came at me again.

By then, I had the spatha out, and I summoned it just in time to leave the blade an inch from his chest.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

"Just testing you out. You need to be quick to survive as a free soul out here."

I glanced over at Alyx, who hadn't moved a muscle. "You knew this was coming?"

She nodded. "I could smell his aggression. I knew you would be fine."

I let the spatha go back to the lettuce, or the tomato, or wherever it went when it wasn't in use. I pocketed the stone again.

"Lead the way," I said to Damien.

He headed for the exit, and we followed. We moved through dark corridors, up a flight of iron stairs, and back out into what was still a club. It resembled the club we had left somewhat, but it seemed as though it had been passed through a strangely distorted filter. It was still vice, but it had changed into something darker and more sinister.

There were girls up on the stage. They were still naked. They were still bumping and grinding. The music they moved to was discordant, off-tempo, like listening to the Beatles in reverse. They clawed and bit at one another, tearing into one another's flesh and drawing blood.

The patrons of the place had their eyes on them, but they didn't all seem to be watching. Most looked disheveled and downtrodden; their eyes glazed over with a look of utter hopelessness. There were a few demons in the club, a fiend and a pair of devils. They weren't like the kind that existed on Earth. They were bigger and more imposing. I noticed them noticing us.

"It's depressing, but not much of a departure from what I'm used to," I said.

"Hell isn't for the free souls," Damien said. "Do you see those mortals at the front?"

I followed the dancers down to the front of the stage. Four men in ratty old suits were positioned there, heads drenched in the dancer's blood, eyes frozen on the display.

"What about them?"

"They're always there. In that spot. They can't leave." He laughed. "An eternity of being forced to watch, and covered in a reminder of their weakness. Those devils back there can come and go as they please. They like the show because they choose when to see it."

"You're saying the main torture of Hell is a lack of choice?"

"Bingo. Sure, you have some of the worse offenders who are also subjected to pain day in and day out, but they don't have a choice either. The lesser damned get stuck with their vice, be it lust, sloth, greed, whatever. They get the version of it that the Big Guy chooses, and they live it until they either become numb and lost or until they man up and break free."

"Break free? I thought Hell was eternal?"

"Where do you think the devils and all of the other free souls of Hell come from? Where do you think Lucifer gets his stock to send back to Earth? Some souls manage to break loose of their bonds and go on the run. When they do, if they can survive for a day without being captured or killed, then they get bumped up to a minor demon and can start earning more and more freedom."

"You did that?"

"Yup."

"How long were you down here?"

"Fifteen years." He shuddered visibly as he said it. "Then another ten working up to fiend and getting sent back to the mortal world. Most people think of Hell, and they think of chaos. There is a level of it, especially out here, but don't forget that Lucifer used to

be an angel. He still keeps the underlying systems running like clockwork."

I was surprised by the information. I had always known that many of the demons on Earth originated in Hell and were sent back to sow chaos and destruction there. I had never learned how that process occurred.

"So how does a damned soul break loose of their bonds?"

"Usually it's because the torture doesn't work on them. Instead of growing weary and hopeless at the endlessness of it, they come to enjoy it instead. Even then, many will choose to remain for that reason, and Hell almost becomes Heaven to them. If Lucifer senses that and the soul doesn't try to claim free will, their punishment will be altered."

"Use it or lose it?"

"Pretty much."

Damien guided us to the exit. We were at the door out into the wilds of Hell when the two devils decided they had done enough watching. They took up a position in front of the doors, crossing their arms and trying to look more frightening. Each was over twelve feet in height and solidly built, their red, leathery skin bulging with strength.

"I don't recognize these two. Do you, Skalax?" one asked the other.

"Who are your new friends, Damien?" Skalax replied.

"Careful, Dilix," Damien said. "These two have business in the Pit. Let them pass or you may find yourselves starting over."

"Two creatures from the mortal realm are supposed to frighten us?" Dilix said.

Apparently, these two had never come across a Great Were before. Being born on the Earth plane, Alyx's kind probably didn't travel to Hell very often.

"Just let us go," I said. "I don't have time for your bullshit."

Dilix and Skalax glanced at each other. A moment later, massive swords appeared in both of their hands.

Damien backed away at once. I gathered my power while summoning the spatha to hand. It was a toothpick compared to their huge blades, but it was equally powerful, if not more so. The angelic scripture would lessen the brutality of any parry.

Alyx remained in human form, her eyes glued to the demons' every motion. She was keeping her demon form a secret. If they

didn't know what she was, she wasn't going to tell them unless she had to.

"You're sure I'll be fine?" I asked.

She smiled and nodded at me, just before she slipped away from a falling blade.

I threw my power out at Skalax, hitting him hard enough to send him crashing into the wall and make a massive dent in it. At the same time, I scampered in toward Dilix, getting close before he could bring his blade around. It was a terrible weapon for this range. I pushed off, leaping up high and bringing the spatha around. His neck felt like soft butter as the sword eased through it.

I landed, spinning toward Skalax, who had regained his feet. He saw what had happened to Dilix, and his sword vanished.

"What manner of demon are you?" he asked.

"He's not a demon," Alyx said. "He is the diuscrucis."

"Diuscrucis?" Skalax didn't know the word or its meaning.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Get out of the way or I'll take your head, too."

Skalax stepped aside. "Of course, Master," he said, bending into a subservient pose. "As you command."

We stepped through the pile of ash that had been Dilix only seconds before. Damien pushed open the door and held it for us.

Demons who were killed on Earth were sent back to Hell. What about demons killed in Hell? "What will happen to Dilix?"

"His soul will return to its original state as one of the damned. His torture will be greater for his failure. He may or may not ever become free again."

"It seems risky to start fights with consequences like that."

"We're the damned, diuscrucis. It's in our nature to cause conflict. You would have more luck teaching a pig to sing."

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We moved from the club out onto the streets. There was a lot more to take in outside, from the constant, faint smell of sulfur to the red and black sky, where heavy clouds of smoke sent a constant dusting of ash falling across everything. It was already two inches deep in the streets.

The city was similar to New York, but it clearly wasn't the Big Apple. Everything was damaged to some extent. Broken windows, dented light poles, and cracked facades were everywhere, along with downtrodden pedestrians making endless loops barefoot through the streets, the glass from the windows slicing them up and leaving trails of blood in their wake. There were other damned souls here as well. Women that Damien said were adulterers were being chased through the streets by devils with massive, erect penises while their male counterparts were running from harpies carrying any one of an assortment of sharp instruments. Murderers were paraded on the back of slow-moving trucks as if part of a twisted Thanksgiving Day Parade, some in nooses, some in guillotines, some in the electric chair. They were killed, reformed,

and killed again, over and over while we waited for them to meander past.

There were others, of course. So many others. This was Hell. It was also a city. A hundred different tortures prepared for all kinds of sinners and assholes.

I couldn't imagine how any of them could come to enjoy their fate and earn their freedom.

I also knew it had happened.

It only proved how twisted the person was to begin with, and it showed how deep Lucifer's hatred of his Father ran that these were the creatures he wanted to on Earth disrupting the balance.

Dante had warned me about the carnage. I was surprised to find that it was easy to become numb to, and even easier for me to recognize that these souls deserved it. Every one of them had done more harm than good in their lifetime, or they wouldn't have been there in the first place.

"How come the city doesn't get buried in the ash?" I asked, wiping some of it from my shoulders and hair.

"It all resets every day. We follow mortal time here though no-one in Hell sleeps. It makes it easier to synchronize with the efforts of the demons back home."

The demons who wanted to destroy humankind. It was easy to forget that, being here instead of there. I needed to get a move on, get the FOG and get back. Which reminded me...

"Abaddon," I said internally, seeking the demon.

I could still feel the link, but it had weakened considerably. He didn't answer.

"Where are you headed, anyways diuscrucis?" Damien asked. "You showed Cabal that sword of yours, and he didn't even remember to ask."

"Cain has something I need," I said.

A pedestrian with bare feet tried to walk between us. Damien grabbed him and threw him to the side, causing him to cry out in anguish. He didn't stop until he made it back to the broken glass on the sidewalk.

"Did you just say, Cain?"

"Yeah."

"As in, the son of Lucifer?"

"Yeah."

"Damn you, Cabal." Damien spat on the ground at my feet. It

sizzled and burst into flame. “I never would have guessed you wanted to end down here.”

“What would happen to my soul if I did?” I asked, regretting it as soon as the words had escaped me.

“That would be up to the Big Guy to decide.”

Which is what I was afraid of. I doubted he was too happy with me stopping all of his evil plots to this point. Still, maybe he figured he would owe me one for getting rid of the Beast. It wasn’t just humankind I had saved with that one. It was everything.

“Is Cain that dangerous?” Alyx said.

“He’s the son of Satan. What do you think?”

“I don’t want to confront him,” I said. “I just want to take something of his.”

“You want to steal from him.”

“Technically.”

“You do understand the definition of ‘steal,’ right?”

“Yes. He took this thing from the mortal realm. Since I’m the presiding Divine there, that means he stole it from me first. I’m just trying to get it back.”

“Technically,” Damien said.

“Yes.”

He laughed. “Here’s the deal, diuscrucis. I’m not going within a hundred miles of Cain without an invitation. No demon who wants to stay free does. I’ll give you directions, and then I’m going to make my pickup. I’ll wait for you back here. You have three days before I abandon you. Got it?”

“The deal I made with Cabal was for you to guide us,” I said.

“I told you I’ll give you directions.”

“I can kill you myself.”

“You could, but then I wouldn’t be able to help you at all because I’d be back to walking the streets like these pathetic souls.”

“What did they do, anyway?”

“Nothing. They did nothing. They squandered their lives without trying to live them.”

“That’s why you were down here?”

“Yeah. I was a sad sack of shit, wasn’t I? I lived with my mom right up until the day I overdosed on crack. Never had a job, never had a girlfriend, never left home. Drug Addiction may be a disease. Lifelong ennui is the work of the Devil.” He laughed at that. “So, take it or leave it.”

I wasn't happy about losing my guide. I also didn't have much of a choice. I was happy to have Alyx with me, so I would at least still have a demonic companion. I glanced over at her. It was the first time I had ever had a thought like that.

"Fine. Tell me how to get there."

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“Maybe we should have brought Damien along at swordpoint,” I said.

Alyx laughed, an odd mix between a growl and a giggle that came across as disgustingly cute. “The directions he gave us are fine. See, there’s the station up ahead.”

We were still in the city part of Hell. I didn’t know if it had a name, but I had taken to calling it ‘The Kitchen,’ in honor of the area in New York. We had been wandering through it for the last two hours or so, following the directions Damien had recited three times. There was nothing fun about it. I walked the streets, evading the sloths, turning my eyes away from the lustful and the adulterers, and trying to figure out the crimes of some of the even more twisted punishments we discovered along the way. Alyx kept her eyes forward, barking out every change in direction and leading me to our destination. I already knew she had keen senses. Her keen intellect was a pleasant surprise.

Damien’s directions led us to the Terminal, a massive train station near the edge of the Kitchen. It was the main form of

transportation from one area of Hell to another for any free soul who wasn't able to fly or wasn't big enough to walk quickly. That meant no fallen angels, devils, or harpies, to name a few. It did include fiends, succubi, incubi, and other assorted wingless nasties.

Word of my identity had spread quickly, and, for the most part, the demons had left us alone on our journey, hiding in shadows and watching us pass. To be honest, the whole thing was strangely familiar and felt a little too normal to me for my liking. Was the inference that my life was already a sort of Hell? I hoped not.

The Terminal was crowded when we reached it, with all sorts of demons milling around, hissing and whispering and cursing at one another. They pushed and shoved whenever another of their kind got too close, but they didn't outright attack. It was obvious that the fear of going back to whatever they were before was strong enough to keep them mostly in line.

"Do we have to buy a ticket, do you think?" I asked as we slipped through the gates into the area. They were gnarled and twisted, with lots of pointy tips that a demon could get impaled on if they weren't careful.

"I don't think so," Alyx said. "I don't see anywhere to buy one."

I looked around. There was no counter, no help of any kind. We were surrounded by hundreds of demons on fenced-in grounds, a thin space in the center where the tracks crossed the only unoccupied area. I moved my eyes up, taking in the sight of a huge fire demon crossing the sky, on its way to who knows where. What did demons do in their spare time? Did demons even have spare time? Where were they all going that they needed a train to travel back and forth? Once more, I wanted Damien here so I could grill him on the finer points of culture in Hell.

"How about a timetable?" I asked.

Not that we had any idea what time it was. There was no sun, so the sky never really changed. It remained red and black. It continued raining ash. I was already sick of it.

"There's a lot of demons here. I bet it will come soon."

"What was the name of our stop again?"

"The Desolation."

"Sounds like a nice vacation spot."

She laughed again. I was going to have to up my game to keep her going. I was enjoying the sound, especially here.

"The son of Lucifer lives there. I doubt it's much of a vacation

for anyone but him."

"Good point," I said.

We spent the next ten minutes or so standing around among the demons, staying shoulder-to-shoulder in the crowd. I was still on high alert, unconvinced that the denizens of the underworld wouldn't decide to gang up on us at some point, once enough of them realized who we were. I had noticed more and more of them casting their glances our way the longer we waited, and a soft murmur had risen in the background cacophony of hissing, whispering, and distant screaming.

"Hey," a small voice said from somewhere nearby.

I turned my head, seeking the speaker.

"Landon," Alyx said, squeezing my shoulder. I looked at her, and she directed my attention down.

"Yeah, here I am Burj Dubai."

It was a demon, of course. A two-foot-tall spike of dark brown leather, with a small snout and big, round eyes that bulged away from its skull.

"Are you talking to me?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm talking to you. Why do you think I'm standing on your foot?"

He was so light; I hadn't even noticed.

"Can we help you with something?" Alyx asked.

"You can help me with a lot of things," the demon replied. "Or maybe I can help you. I can see up your skirt from here." He stuck his tongue out suggestively.

"Disgusting," Alyx replied. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you right now."

He scampered back behind my legs. "Oh. Whoa, whoa, whoa. I was just kidding. A little demon sexual humor, that's all. No, no, no. Zifah wants to be friends with the diuscrucis."

"Zifah? That's your name?" I asked.

"The short version." He came back around to stand between us. "I've been following you since you left the club. I wasn't sure who you were at first, but then I heard the others whispering. I think we can help one another."

A demon would never offer to do anything unless it wanted something in return. While the diminutive demon didn't look like trouble, I knew better than to assume. I also remembered what Dante had said to me about being careful of offers down here.

“Not interested, thanks.”

“What? You don’t even want to hear my story?”

“Not really.” I shook my foot, knocking him off. I had never seen such a small demon before that didn’t have wings.

“Oh, come on, Landon,” he said, dusting himself off. “I know, I know, don’t trust demons, especially in Hell. I get that; I do. I even know where you got that advice. I met Dante, a long time ago. Did you know that?”

“Still not interested.”

“I don’t want much. Just a chance to escape. To level up, so to speak. I want to go to - look out behind you!”

I didn’t turn around. I wasn’t dumb enough to fall for that trick. The demon had probably heard about the sword and was going to try to steal the stone from my pocket the moment my attention was diverted.

Something hit me in the back of the head. Hard. It sent me reeling forward into Alyx, who reached out and caught me. We were both off-balance, and we fell in a tangle together.

“Not now,” Alyx said. “We’re in public.”

“Funny,” I replied, using my power to push myself up and twirl around at the same time.

A demon was standing a few feet away, staring at me with death in its eyes. He was eight feet tall, with a bad overbite from the size of his teeth, and wrinkled, thick skin. I had never encountered a creature like him before.

“They say you free soul from the mortal world. They say you tough. They say Jazir should fear diuscrucis. Jazir fear nothing.”

I reached into my pocket and withdrew the stone, summoning the spatha. It seemed the demons wanted to test me and had sent a brute to do it.

“Come on,” I said, dropping into a crouch.

A circle grew around us. Alyx moved back with it, and I noticed Zifah was beside her, his eyes shifting between me and her legs. I made a mental note to deal with him when this was over.

The demon pounced at me, his agility defying his size. I stepped back, raising the point of the sword and holding it out to let him impale himself on it.

It hit his flesh and slid up and to the side, not even leaving a scratch. His fist hit me in the jaw, and I flew back into Alyx a second time.

I pushed my power into healing, keeping an eye on the demon. He waited for me in the center of the circle, giving me a chance to understand how he worked instead of taking advantage. Now I knew that his skin was tough enough to stop the obsidian spatha.

That was bad.

“I can kill him for you,” Alyx said as I pulled myself away.

“And leave me looking weak? Not unless he’s about to kill me.”

“Okay.”

I approached the demon again, discarding the spatha and putting the stone back in my pocket. He was smiling now, a toothy grin of superiority.

“Come on,” I said a second time.

He rushed forward again, repeating his first move. I planted my feet, surrounding myself with my power, holding it tight against me like a second skin.

His fist came at my face. I pushed out against it, catching the force of it and leaving him standing with his weight forward, into his suddenly ineffective punch. I returned his smile as he adjusted himself and backed away.

“You tougher than you look,” he said. He lifted his head slightly. “Train coming. I break you now.”

He didn’t hesitate this time, rushing toward me at ridiculous speed. I stepped out of the way of his first punch, ducked under the second, and steered myself around to his side. I threw a couple of ineffective punches of my own before dancing away again. I could hear the train in the background now, a growing howl like it was powered by a million tortured souls, and it probably was.

Jazir growled in frustration as I moved away from two more strikes, and then jumped forward and punched him in the face. He didn’t even flinch, and I barely escaped his grasp before he crushed me.

“Stop moving,” he said. “You like little piss demon, flying around and being annoying.”

A harsh light appeared over the mass of demons, the lights of the approaching train. It was time to end this game.

I gathered my power, pulling it in and bunching it into a tight ball. I stepped back away from Jazir, putting a few feet of distance between us.

“Give up now,” I said.

Jazir wasn’t the only one who laughed. A hundred demons

laughed with him.

He tried to hit me again. I pushed my power out, wrapping him in it and lifting, throwing him up and over the crowd.

He howled as he arced through the air and landed right in front of the train. His skin might have been impervious to a blade. His bones weren't immune to being crushed. The train didn't notice his howling, or when it stopped.

The laughter stopped with it. All eyes fell everywhere but where I was standing, and the demons began assembling to climb onto the train.

Alyx grabbed my arm and kissed my cheek. "Well done, my love," she said.

"Yeah, nice work, diuscrucis," Zifah said, still hovering under Alyx's leg.

"I saw you looking," I said.

He backed up a few steps. "Heh. I am a demon, you know. Damn mortal prudes. Look, I saved your life-"

"How did you save my life? I would have had to fight him whether he got that sucker punch in or not."

He shrugged. "At least I tried. How many demons down here would go that far?"

"I'm still not interested."

He growled softly and spat on the ground in front of me. "Fine. Have it your way. One more word of advice: you should be more careful who you make enemies with. Or at least, who you refuse to make friends with. See you later, Landon."

He scampered off into the crowd, vanishing in a sea of legs.

"Do you think I should have listened to him?" I asked Alyx.

"No. Take your chances with what you can see in front of you, not intangible threats and promises."

I nodded before leaning in and kissing her on the cheek for once.

It was good advice.

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The train was a distorted replica of the Orient Express, a steam locomotive powered by the Damned, who were chopped and fed like coals into a massive furnace. The interior was mahogany and red, the seats plush and relatively comfortable, and filled with demons. They acted almost civilized, choosing a seat and sitting quietly while the locomotive made its travels.

Alyx and I found a seat near the back. As with the Terminal, none of the demons on the train would look at me, turning their heads away the moment I came anywhere near them. It was odd how it made me feel more out of place than being the only non-demon in an entire plane full of them did. Even though it was a sign of respectful fear, it was easy for my formerly human ego to take it as rejection.

“How far to the Desolation?” I asked.

“According to Damien, it’s the third stop. He said about an hour.”

“I still can’t believe this is Hell.”

“Me neither.”

“Really? You’re a demon.”

She looked hurt by the statement, true or not. “I’m a Were. A child of Lucifer, yes. Does that make me nothing but a demon to you?”

I swallowed a sudden lump in my throat. My mind wandered back further than it had in a long time. All the way back to Rebecca. She had been the first demon I met, and I thought she had been able to change. Maybe she did in the end, but not before she screwed me a few times for believing in her.

I reminded myself that Alyx was not Rebecca. Not in any way I could discern. Was it true that she could be completely playing me with the sweet, naive Great Were act? Of course. Demons were good at that. Rebecca had been. I was more experienced now. I hoped I was wiser. I didn’t see anything in Alyx that I had seen in Rebecca. She had decided I was her mate because Ulnyx had been the Alpha of her pack, and I had absorbed the Great Were’s powers at one point. It made sense from a Divine perspective, and it was the simplest reason anyone could have given for anything.

Simple was always more believable.

“You’re more than a demon to me,” I said. “You know I don’t choose my friends by their affiliation to good or evil. That’s not my way.” I couldn’t afford to be that narrow-minded.

“Do you love me?”

“Alyx, how many times are you going to ask?”

“Until you say yes.”

“What if I never say yes?”

“Then I’ll keep asking.”

Simple.

“What if I did say yes?”

“Then we should mate. I will make you happy.”

My heart was pounding by now. I was starting to feel like every time she asked I was getting closer to saying yes, despite every intention not to.

“You make me happy as a friend,” I said.

“I’ll make you happier as a lover.” She paused, looking down at her lap. Her voice softened. “Landon?”

It was odd behavior from her. “What is it?” I asked, concerned.

“I knew that I loved you because I was intended to be one of Ulnyx’s mates, and you were once the Alpha of my pack. But-“

Her voice trailed away. She looked uncomfortable, and

vulnerable in a way I hadn't seen and could barely imagine.

"But what?" I asked.

"I have other… feelings. From here." She put a hand on her heart. "And from here." She put her hand on her gut, where I believed the soul rested. "Not just obligation and a desire to mate with you. Something more. We've been together for the last three weeks, and when I think of being parted from you, I don't like it."

I stared at her, my heart ready to thump right through my chest. Was she telling me that she really loved me? Not only in the way she had believed love was but for real? I knew demons were capable of real love. Izak had loved Josette and Sarah.

"What does it mean?" she asked when I remained silent for too long.

"It means you're more than a demon. A lot more."

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16

The two stops before the Desolation were the Spikes and the Pit.

The Spikes were a series of sharp mountain peaks where the torments of the damned echoed from the spires, the actual torture generated deep within the mountains. I didn't know what kind of souls were sent there, but I could hear the difference in their screams from those of the Kitchen, and from those fueling the train. Judging by that, they were not in a happy place. Not. At. All.

The Pit was the more classic representation of Hell. It was where the fire and brimstone hit it hard. The train paused at a station there to take on more passengers, who seemed to pick up on their counterpart's attitudes and instinctively know not to look at me. From my position near the window, I could see the massive pit in the ground, and the cliff faces where damned souls were chained and screaming out as fire licked at their bodies. I had wondered as we began moving again how those souls ever got free to become demons. They didn't have use of their hands or feet to get themselves out of the chains. Did they call out to their keepers? Or were the eternally trapped? Maybe that was what happened to the

demons who died?

The Desolation made me cry.

I did it silently, and I tried to hide it from Alyx. I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to look weak. I was glad none of the demons would notice anyway.

"What's wrong?" Alyx asked me, noticing the tears.

I pointed out the window. "I've been here before."

"In Hell?"

"It wasn't in Hell, but it looked just like this."

It was inside the Box. A broken Earth. A post-apocalyptic, destroyed world. Buildings turned to slag and scrap, corpses everywhere. It was the Beast's world. The one that he had destroyed with his power. Or at least, it was a reproduction of it. I had defeated the Beast, but I had lost Charis. I had lost Clara. I had almost lost myself.

It hurt to see it again.

"It isn't the same place. Whatever hurt you there, I won't let it hurt you here."

I reached out and took her hand without thinking. I squeezed it, and she squeezed back.

"It will be well, my love," she said.

"Thanks," I replied.

The train slowed to a stop. Most of the demons were getting on the train. Only a minority departed with us.

"Damien said Cain's palace is near the center. He said you can't miss it."

It was going to be the Freedom Tower. I just knew that it was. It would make the entire nightmare complete. Dante had said Lucifer wouldn't bother with me, but I couldn't help thinking that he was watching, and he had done this to torment me as best he could. A joke only he could make.

I took her hand again, and we started walking, picking our way over the corpses and through the destruction. We hadn't gone too far when I realized that the corpses weren't dead, per se. They were more of the damned, souls left to hunger and thirst for all of eternity. The gluttonous, I assumed.

We covered a lot of ground in two hours, but the broken city seemed to stretch forever. Turning in circles revealed more of the same as far as we could see, as true a desolation as I could have ever imagined.

“If Cain’s palace is too far away, we won’t make it back to Damien in time,” I said.

“We have lots of time left. We can move a lot faster than we have been if I change.”

“I’m worried a Great Were running across this landscape is going to attract the wrong kind of attention. I don’t want Cain to know we’re coming.”

“You don’t think two people walking across the Desolation will attract attention? There’s nothing else out here but the damned, and they aren’t upright.”

“My plan hinged around sneaking into Cain’s palace.” I knew it wasn’t much of a plan. But then, how could I plan anything when I had no idea what we were walking into.

“I think we need to change the plan. We’ve been walking for two hours, and I don’t see anything. How do we even know we’re going in the right direction?” She gave me that mischievous smile again. “Besides, it’s the only way I can get you on my back.”

I could feel the heat on my face, and it wasn’t from being in Hell. I stood silently for a minute, looking around and thinking.

“Okay. You’re right. We only have three days, and I don’t want to waste them all walking through this.”

She leaned in, nuzzling my neck. One second, I could feel the softness of her skin against mine. The next, I felt the rougher fur of a massive muzzle.

Our eyes met. I could still see Alyx behind them, but it was an understatement to say her demon form was nowhere near as attractive as her human form. At the same time, I could still feel our growing connection there.

“Get on,” she growled, her voice rougher.

She dropped to all fours, dipping lower so I could climb onto her back. I used my power to plant me to her, and we were off.

Alyx bounded across the landscape with ease, leaping over shorter walls and debris and pushing aside burned out cars and other garbage. Within minutes, we had pushed our past location beyond the horizon, and within an hour we had traveled nearly fifty miles. I knew Alyx was enjoying the run, and having me riding her. Part of me didn’t want to be having a good time in Hell, but I was a balance of good and evil. I did enjoy it, and I leaned down and wrapped my arms around Alyx’s thick neck, holding on tight.

We covered another twenty miles. We saw nothing but more of

the same. There had to be a million souls or more out here, laying among the ruin, barely able to move. It was horrible to see them, knowing there was a semblance of life in the withered frames. I had to remind myself over and over that they had been gluttonous enough in the mortal world that they had been delivered to this one. Was it fair to torture them for all of eternity? I never expected anything to be fair.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," I said, growing frustrated by out lack of progress.

Alyx came to a stop, and I slid off her back. She changed back to human form, looking sweaty and maybe even a little tired. I didn't think Great Weres could get tired.

"Damien didn't tell us which way to go," she said. "Maybe he wanted us to get lost?"

"And piss off Cabal by not bringing us back with the sword?"

"Good point."

"In any case, I think we need to start over. Head back the way we came until we get to the station. We can try a new direction, or maybe ask one of the demons which way to go."

She nodded. "I think that's the best option."

"Do you need to rest?"

She was hesitant to tell me she did, but I could see it in her posture.

"It's okay if you do."

"I don't know what it is. Back home I can run for a day without tiring. I know it's hot here, but I'm not used to this."

"Have you fed recently?"

Weres were like any of Lucifer's children. They needed human blood at least occasionally to survive.

"Not since you freed me from Espanto."

"That was almost a month ago."

"I know. I have gone longer. I feel like being in this place is draining me when it should be energizing me."

"You're still a creature of the mortal plane, even if you're Hell-made."

"You aren't tired."

"I'm technically not alive. In fact, I've technically died twice already. We can rest a while." I pointed over at a low wall that used to belong to an apartment building or something. It was clear of the damned. "We can sit there. You can feed."

I said it without thinking. Alyx's expression changed to one of shocked pleasure.

"Are you sure?" she asked, noticing my sudden discomfort.

I had let Rebecca feed on me when she was tired. That hadn't worked out well. Alyx wasn't Rebecca.

"Yes. I'll heal as fast as you can drink, and it should give you your energy back. You're going to need it."

We walked over to the wall, and I sat down against it. She was going to sit next to me, but I reached out and pulled her into my lap.

"You pick strange times to be interested, Mast-Landon."

"It will be easier for you to reach my neck."

"I'm not a vampire. I don't need your neck."

"It's easier to reach."

One of her fingers extended into a razor claw. "You're sure?" she asked again. Her face was close to mine, and I could smell her sweat mixed with her normal scent.

"Yes," I said, taking her hand and putting the finger on my neck. I felt a light sting as she cut me, and then her mouth was against my flesh, drawing out my blood.

She murmured softly as she drew it out, her hands wrapping around me so she could hold me tight against her. The murmur changed into a pleased growl that was almost a purr.

I focused on restoring myself, pushing my energy into my body to heal as fast as she fed. She was thirstier than she had admitted, and I soon found myself closing my eyes and relaxing into it. I put my attention on the feel of her weight in my lap, her lips against my skin, her bottom against my thighs.

I opened my eyes. She had stopped drinking and was leaning back, looking at me while she rocked gently on top of me. Of course, I had gotten aroused.

"Alyx," I said softly, lost for breath.

She responded by leaning in and pressing her lips to mine. Half of me begged to push her away, feeling guilty for the sudden rage of emotions I was feeling and telling me I was dishonoring Charis' memory. The other half was a demon in Hell, and it returned the affection with an equal and opposite response, gripping her tighter and opening my mouth to accept her tongue.

What was I doing? Why was I doing it? Lust? Love? Something in between? Or was it the atmosphere of the place, driving me

mad?

I didn't know, and for precious minutes I didn't care. I held Alyx tight against me, returning her kisses with equal passion. It felt wrong. It felt wonderful. I hated myself for it, and yet I didn't want to stop.

I should have known that nothing so perfectly flawed was meant to last.

I heard the demon before I saw it, and I broke off our latest kiss in a too-late effort to defend. Large hands grabbed Alyx by the shoulders, pulling her from my lap and throwing her across the wasteland. She went fifty feet at least until she crashed into a dilapidated car, hitting it hard enough to roll it over and bend the frame.

I pushed out with my power with all the force I had. The demon standing in front of me didn't even flinch, and I felt his power peeling mine aside like it was nothing more than a nuisance.

"Diuscrucis, I presume?" the demon said. As powerful as he was, he had to be an archfiend. He was six feet tall, with dark, chunky hair, narrow features that would have made him a great runway model, and an overly pleasant smile. He wore a dark purple leather duster on top of a neatly worn suit.

There was only one demon this could be.

"Cain, I presume?"

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17

“How did you find us?” I asked.

We were riding in the back of a carriage that had followed the son of Lucifer out into the city. Alyx was beside me, dazed but unharmed by the throw while Cain sat opposite us, his posture that of supreme confidence. And why not? He had made my power look like a water pistol instead of an assault rifle.

“This is my realm, diuscrucis. How would I not find you?”

He smiled disarmingly, casting his eyes over at Alyx. He had made it clear that he thought she was something special when he had helped her back to her feet, apologizing for being so rough and dropping to a knee to kiss her hand.

Of course, Lucifer’s son was handsome. Lucifer was supposed to be doubly so. Alyx seemed oblivious to it, and her expression didn’t change when his gaze fell on her.

“My apologies again, Alyx. I needed to make a statement to your companion.”

Alyx didn’t respond.

“I know you wouldn’t have come all the way to Hell without

reason," he said, putting his attention back on me. "And since you decided to grace the Desolation with your treasure, I assume that reason has something to do with me."

He had the look of a man who knew.

"Go on," I said.

"There's only one reason I can think that you might have gone through the trouble to come to Hell and seek me out, despite the fact that you must have been warned that your power is a pittance compared to mine. Here, at least." He smiled again. "Abaddon's soul has been ripped from his realm and returned to yours while I have captured the so-called Fist of God, an interesting mashup of mortal technology and Divine energy that may be the only thing that can contain Abaddon indefinitely."

I tried not to look surprised. "What do you mean, indefinitely?"

"Of course, you didn't know, did you?" he asked, pleased with himself. "The prison the demons have constructed to keep him will not keep him forever. He is more powerful than they realize. He is almost more powerful than me."

That was bad news, and Cain was giving it freely. I didn't like anything about that.

"But the Fist of God definitely can?" I asked.

"It can now. We took the damaged shell and managed to get it reconditioned, and then we added our special sauce to the mix. Demonic runes, allowing it to be controlled by the mind. All you need is a pendant like this one."

He reached under his shirt and produced a metal disc with runes scratched all over it. I think it had been taken from the FOG.

"You made it work?" I asked, almost impressed.

He shook his head. "Not quite yet. I was waiting for the right soul to put in it. I had been hoping maybe for an archangel." His smile changed, and I realized I was right to be worried about how much he was divulging. "I think your arrival has been most timely, don't you?"

"You can't put me in the Fist of God," I said, fighting to keep my exterior appearance calm.

"No? Why not?"

"My power isn't Divine. It came from the Beast."

"His smile lessened, and he rubbed at his chin. "Hmm, interesting. That would make for quite an experiment."

"I won't let you hurt him," Alyx said, pouncing toward Cain, her

hands shifting to claws.

He didn't even flinch. Without moving a single muscle, she was thrown back against the seat of the carriage and held.

"Feisty. I like that."

I stared at Cain. Dante had warned me, and I had rushed ahead with the plan anyway. At least now I knew the mortal world was screwed if I didn't make it back with the FOG. Abaddon would escape, and his power would pull the life out of everything he crossed until there was nothing left.

How the heck was I going to get the armor away from Cain when Cain was completely owning me? I couldn't fight him. I couldn't hurt him. We were stuck. Totally stuck.

Damn.

"So now what?" I asked.

"I'm taking you back to the palace," Cain replied. "You'll be chained up while I discuss the potential of using you in the armor with my team. If they don't think it's possible as you claimed, I may simply mount you as a trophy. Or I might gift you to my father."

"I don't suppose we can bargain for the Fist instead?"

"Out of the question," he replied. He looked at Alyx again. "As for you, I think you're rather exotic, and I admire your spirit. You'll be brought to my harem and prepared as one of my concubines. I should like a taste of you."

"Forget it," I said before I realized how stupid it sounded.

"I don't think you're in a position to argue," Cain said, patronizing me.

Alyx was trying to move, and to shift. Her muscles were bulging from her arms, and her face was wrinkled from the effort. She paused for a moment, her eyes sadder than anything I had ever seen. I couldn't imagine what it would feel like to be made prisoner to a demon again after finally managing to get free.

"Next time, you should be a little more prepared before you plan to visit the son of Lucifer," Cain said, still patronizing.

I glared at him in angry silence for the rest of the trip. I wasn't going to let Alyx be a prisoner again. I was going to find my way out of this, and I was going to destroy Cain.

Somehow.

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Cain's palace was pretty much what I expected. Think Taj Mahal, with a bit more gaudiness, iron spikes, and ugly statues. It was a massive place, and probably the only location in Hell that had a pool. Or was it a moat? As the carriage rode over the bridge crossing it, and I looked down, it was hard to tell.

It separated the palace from the rest of the desolation. It also had some succubi and incubi in it, splashing, swimming, and being frisky with one another. It was like crossing over to the Playboy Mansion; orgy included.

"I can let you go for a swim before I string you up if you like?" Cain said.

"No thanks," I replied.

It had taken twenty minutes or so to arrive from the time Cain had pinned Alyx to her seat. She had alternated between complete calm and total struggle a few times, fighting hard to break free of the demon's hold. It was no use, even with all her power and her recent feeding. Cain was just that strong. The more interesting part was that we had gone back in the direction Alyx and I had come.

Either Cain had hidden the palace from us, or it had moved.

In other words, we would never have found it until Cain wanted us to. Whether I had concocted a good plan beforehand or not, that was the bottom line.

It made me feel a little better about being caught. Not much, but a little. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with Alyx, I would have seen him coming. Maybe. At the same time, now I knew that this mess could be the only way to have even a slim chance at grabbing the FOG.

The carriage crossed the pool and entered a large courtyard. A pair of demons met us there, opening the door for Cain and dropping to their knees so he could climb down their backs. They did the same for Alyx before leaving me to my own devices.

Cain didn't try to keep me from running. He knew I wouldn't leave Alyx behind, and he was still manipulating her like a marionette. She walked stiffly beside him as he strolled across the open area to a marble archway, through the archway and into a large foyer. I followed him, unsure what else to do.

Then Cain clapped his hands. Immediately, a dozen female souls in gossamer fabrics filed out and to him, surrounding him and looking at him with adoring eyes. They were all wearing a gold bracelet with demonic runes etched around them. Cain took an extra from the hands of one of the women and slipped it onto Alyx's wrist. Then he whispered something; it flamed on for a few seconds, and he visibly relaxed, no longer having to hold her with his will.

She fell into line with the others.

"I thought you liked her feisty," I said, doing my best to stay calm about the whole thing. It wouldn't help either of us to be stupid.

"I will release her when needed. Right now, I want her docile so that I can show you around."

"Show me around?"

"Yes. I want you to see the work I've been doing."

"Why bother?"

"Because I'm surrounded by peons, diuscrucis. Pathetic demons who don't know what true power is. You do. I can talk to you on an almost even level."

"Your power is much stronger than mine."

"Only here. If we were in your realm, it would be different."

He was humble enough to admit it. That wasn't a common

quality in a demon.

Or maybe he was just placating me.

He led me out of the foyer through a series of corridors that I tried to memorize as we passed. I had no way of knowing if the demon would change the layout behind us. I figured if he could move the entire palace, he could shift a few walls. He spoke casually while we walked as if we were old friends.

"I visited the mortal realm once. Did you know that, diuscrucis?"

"You can call me Landon. No, I wasn't aware."

"It was before your time, of course. Though I believe the other one may have been getting started then. What was that one's name again?"

"Charis," I said, wondering if he was trying to get under my skin.

"Right. Yes. That was it. British. I've always loved the British. So proper. So much class. Stiff upper lip, and all that rot." He feigned a proper British accent. "They crumble to nothing when their souls find their way down here. The Germans, though." He laughed but didn't finish the sentence. "Where is she these days?"

He was trying to get under my skin. There was no other reason for him to be mentioning Charis. I should have guessed Lucifer's son couldn't be anything but a bastard, in every sense of the word.

"She's one with the universe," I said. "Her soul is free from all of this crap. Forever."

He seemed confused by the statement. "Free?" I had totally thrown him off his game, and I hadn't even done it on purpose. "Forever? How?"

"I had the power of the Beast inside me. You know the Beast was almost a God in his own right?"

"Can you still do it?"

I didn't think so. But to be honest, I didn't know. Demons had the ability to try to transfer their souls into another host before they went back down to Hell. Did I have the ability to set those souls loose into the aether? I couldn't rule it out completely.

"Maybe, but I doubt it," I said.

He looked at me for a few seconds, and we continued the rest of the walk in silence until we finally reached his laboratory.

"There it is," he said, pushing aside a curtain of spiked beads and leading me into the room.

The Fist of God was hanging above an altar in the center, its shape much less clean than it had been before I crushed it. It had small dents and ripples throughout, and the demonic runes had been etched on the outside, not the inside like the scripture. It was a trap within a trap.

The rest of the room was filled out with some fiends and devils of all sizes, sitting at computers and typing out algorithms and code, and 3D modeling runes. It was as high-tech an operation as I had ever seen, and it felt surreal to be witnessing it in Hell.

Then again, everything about my life was surreal.

"What do you think?" Cain asked, steering me over to it.

"I don't recognize any of the runes."

"That's because they're new. All of them. It had never occurred to us that we could generate unique capabilities by altering the age old glyphs. Not until we saw how the seraphim had done it."

"It never occurred to you? In thousands of years?"

"Such thinking isn't limited to humankind, Landon. We kept it the way it was because that was the way it had always been."

It reminded me of a Youtube video I had seen once about an experiment with monkeys, bananas at the top of a ladder, and electric shocks. The point was to prove how easy it was to create that kind of thinking.

"Master," one of the fiends said, approaching us. He was slender and a little bent, with a ring of wispy white hair circling his scalp. He looked like a scientist.

"Ah, Wilson. Just the fiend I wanted to see." Cain put his arm over the older demon's shoulder. "I want you to meet my friend, Landon. He is the diuscrucis."

Wilson looked me over like I was a lab rat. "Interesting," was all he said.

"I want to put him in the armor, to trap his soul and his power and see what happens. Can it be done?"

It bothered me that he said it with me there.

Wilson stared at me again. "I don't know, Master. We will need to measure his energy and see if we can calculate the wavelengths."

"Wavelengths?" I asked.

"Yes," Cain said. "All power in existence is measurable if you have the right tools. Wavelengths are as good a word to describe it as any other. The ingenuity of humanity has helped provide us with those tools." He paused before he sighed. "Sometimes I wish we

could stop the fighting for a while and let your kind be. I am always curious to see what new things you would devise to kill one another with, and the tools you would create to devise them."

"Me, too," I said.

"Can you measure it?" Cain asked.

"We'll need some time to create a new idolastat," Wilson replied.

"How long?"

"Three days."

"Very well."

Wilson bowed below Cain's arm and wandered off, barking orders to a few of the smaller devils in the lab. Cain shifted his arm to my shoulders.

"Just think about it, Landon. You will be part of the greatest change ever made in Hell. If we can perfect the armor, we will be able to claim the other planes once and for all."

"Lucky me."

He laughed. It was a smooth, charismatic laugh. Part of me felt like he honestly believed he was doing me a favor.

"Come, Landon. Three days is plenty of time to get some nice torture in."

I cringed on the inside. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

"I'm looking forward to it."

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Cain kept his word. He brought me to a dungeon, a pit in the ground that raged with flames and stunk of sulfur, a smaller version of the Pit we had passed by train. He had me stripped naked, and then he shackled my arms and legs and hoisted me up against the hot side of the exposed earth. It would have burned my skin in an instant if I didn't wrap my power around me to protect myself.

"My minions will care for you from here," Cain said. "I'm going to pay a visit to your companion."

"If you lay a hand on her, I will kill you," I said. It was more bravado that I couldn't cash in on, but it escaped me without hesitation.

"I'll keep that in mind while I'm playing with her. Thank you again for stopping by, Landon. You've made me a very happy demon."

He bowed to me and then took his leave.

I struggled against the shackles, pushing my power out beneath them. They were covered in demonic runes that made them extra, extra strong, and they didn't break. I had guessed Cain knew what

he was doing, and wouldn't have made it that easy.

A demon fluttered down to eye level on leather wings. In my anger, I gripped him in my power and threw him into the pit.

"Stay away from me," I shouted.

All I got for the effort was laughter from the other devils. Assholes.

I tried to relax. To calm my mind and think. I didn't know if my innate power to be forgotten would work on Cain. He had been able to find me out in the Desolation, after all. If it did, either I would eventually escape, or I would hang here for the rest of eternity. At least, until he re-discovered me.

Unless I figured out how to escape my bonds.

I had three days.

I was dangling for a few hours when the first visitor arrived. She was an ugly thing, with a rough face and distorted limbs. She had the legs of a goat, the torso of a female weightlifter, and a pair of thorny wings that sat cockeyed on her back.

"A new prisoner," she said. "What fun."

She produced a serrated whip from somewhere, holding up so I could see it. "Master says not to hurt it too much." Her eyes fell to my midsection. "Maybe I won't hurt it at all."

There was no way I was going to let that happen. I threw some of my power out at her. Just enough to shove her away.

"Oh. It has power. More fun." She unrolled the whip, drawing it back. "Hit me again, you get pain over pleasure."

I hit her again, shoving her back hard enough that she needed to use her wings to keep from falling into the pit.

"Have it that way," she said.

She came at me, and I threw my power out once more. She didn't react to it this time. In fact, it seemed almost as though it entered her, traveled through her arm, and extended out into the whip. The end smacked against my chest with enough force that I was shoved back into the rock hard enough that it broke my spine.

I tried not to make a sound. I couldn't help it. The pain was intense, and I cried out, even as I worked to heal myself. The demon began laughing.

"It could have had pleasure," she said.

This was one of those times when pleasure was worse than pain. I was still happy with the choice I had made.

"Go to-" I started to say. That vulgarity didn't mean anything

down here.

The whip hit me again. And again. I winced each time but didn't scream. I healed the wounds as quickly as she made them, causing her to increase the pace.

We kept going like that for some time. I refused to let her break me or destroy my spirit, and she refused to stop. I don't know how many times I was struck, at least, a thousand. I don't know how much time was passing. We settled into a persistent rhythm of whip and heal, whip and heal.

After a while, I became numb to the pain.

After a while, the whole thing just became tedious.

And then boring.

And then, it truly became hell.

It was like someone poking you in the arm over and over again. Tolerable for a while, until it became the most annoying, frustrating thing imaginable. This was just like that. I went from boredom to true anguish. Not physical. Mental.

And the damn demon knew it.

She knew it was going to go like that. From experience, I guess. She gained this sick, smug grin, and she wore it proudly while she drew back and threw the whip forward one, two, a hundred more times. There was nothing I could do.

I was stuck.

I closed my eyes, unable to bear the sight of her anymore. I felt each strike like a slap on the skin, and I wished it would just stop, even if only for a moment. I knew it wouldn't though. It would continue for hours. She wouldn't get tired because she knew how much I hated it. Even though I tried not to show it, I knew that she knew.

Hours passed. Or maybe it was minutes. When you're in the state of being tortured, it becomes impossible to know. The only thing I felt certain of was that it would never, ever stop.

Until it did.

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I opened my eyes slowly.

The demon that had been whipping me was on the ground at my feet, a pool of blood spreading below her.

Zifah was standing on top of the corpse, looking up at me.

“I decided to give you another chance,” he said.

“What?”

I was a little bit dazed, and a lot confused. How had that tiny demon cut down the harpy without her even making a sound?

“I said, I decided to give you another chance. The truth is, I need to get out of this place, and you’re the only one who would even remotely be willing to help me do it. I know you don’t trust me, diuscrucis, but you will. I’ll make sure of that.”

“How did you find me? How did you even remember me?”

“Sorry bub, you’ve got too many demons down here talking about you for them to forget. I mean, nobody remembers seeing you, but you’ve already become like a legend down here. Plus, I got off the train when you did. I couldn’t remember why I got off, but I figured the reason was in the Desolation, and if it was in the

Desolation, that meant Cain. So I came to the palace and started poking around until I saw you, and then I remembered that was why I was here. Where's your hot girlfriend?"

"Cain took her. How did you get in here?"

"Look at me. Nobody gives a poop about a demon like me."

Did he just say poop?

"Are you going to help me down?"

"Heh. Deal first, down after."

"Whatever you want, you've got. Just get me down."

"I want to come back to the mortal realm with you."

"Okay."

"I want to have sex with your girlfriend."

Was that all demons thought about?

"No."

"You just said anything."

I reached out with my power, squeezing it against him.

"Hey. Oh, come on, diuscrucis. That hurts. Fine. No sex. Just take me with you."

I let him go, and he leaned over like he couldn't breathe.

"How do you know I'm going to get out of here alive?" I asked.

"Because now you've got Zifah. Big things come in small packages."

I hoped he was right. "Fine. We have a deal. I'll swear it in blood once you let me down."

"No need. I believe you. We have a deal. There's only one problem."

"Which is?"

"I can't get you down."

"What?"

"I have some power, but it's not enough to break Cain's runes. You have to get yourself down."

"What happened to big things in small packages?"

"I'm not Son of Lucifer big."

Great. So my torturer was dead, but I was still trapped. And Zifah thought I was going to get out of this alive?

"Alyx," I said. "You need to find Alyx and set her free. She's in Cain's harem. He put a bracelet on her."

"Cain?"

"Yes." I groaned. He couldn't open that one either.

He stood there, tapping his foot on top of the harpy's chest as it

turned to ash. “What if you pull the rock out that the shackles are connected to? You would still be confined, but you’d be able to move.”

“The moment Cain sees me I’ll be back up here. Unless he dies of laughter first.”

“There has to be a way.”

I had tried being hopeful. I was starting to lose it. “I’m sorry you came, Zifah. There isn’t.”

“Cain’s power isn’t absolute.”

“I can’t break the bonds. I tried.”

“What if brute force isn’t the answer?”

Brute force. Pushing and pulling. I closed my eyes again.

“Diuscrucis?” Zifah said, concerned.

“I’m thinking,” I replied.

And I was. I had taken the smallest morsel of the Beast’s power. A god’s power. I had let it enter inside of me, and used it to remake myself. I had taken on many new traits in my experience of it, but Zifah was right. In all of this time, I had always taken a brute force approach to its use. Push it out, pull it back. There were a million applications of the same idea, and even so the concept of it was limiting me.

The Beast’s power had been enough to challenge both God and Lucifer, and I had a sliver of that inside my soul. I had used it to set Charis free, to cast her energy and light out into the universe and set it loose from the cycle of the Divine. It had been a simple act, born of love and sadness. It had hardly taken any effort at all.

I had taken the Divine power and turned it into something else. Something simple and beautiful. I hadn’t created or destroyed. I had only transformed it.

Neutralized it.

Balanced it.

I opened my eyes. “Zifah, you’re a genius.”

He returned a toothy grin. “I know.”

I felt the shackles on my wrists and ankles. I felt Cain’s runes burning into me. I sensed the power there.

I reached out with my own. Calmly. Gently. I laid it on top of the demonic energy. I didn’t push. I didn’t pull. I let it be. I felt Cain’s power beneath it, and I asked it to change.

Almost at once, the shackles shattered.

I fell to the ground, landing on my feet.

“Holy poop,” Zifah said.
“I can’t believe that worked,” I replied, smiling.
All this time I thought I knew myself.
I still didn’t know myself at all.

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“We need to find Alyx,” I said, bending down and retrieving the dead demon’s whip from the ash.

“You need some clothes,” Zifah said.

I looked down at my naked self. I couldn’t create clothes out of nothing. “That would help.”

“This way.” Zifah scampered off toward the door to the dungeon.

I followed behind him, noting the other smaller piles of ash as I went. He had killed the other demons down here, too.

The dungeon fed out into a small chamber. My clothes were thrown in the corner, and I picked them up and put them on. Of course, the stone was missing from my pocket. It was safe to bet that Cain had claimed it.

“Where is the harem?” I asked.

“I can take you.”

We made our way up a long staircase and out into the palace proper, where limestone and brimstone were exchanged for marble and gold. A fiend was coming out of a small room across from the

exit as we were coming through.

I didn't have time to react before Zifah had leaped impossibly high, jabbing a small, dark needle in the demon's neck.

"Help me get him inside before he crumbles," Zifah said.

I used my power to shove the fiend back into the room.

"What did you stab him with?"

Zifah held up the needle. It was transparent now. He stuck it in his arm and withdrew some of his blood, turning it dark once more.

"My blood is poisonous to the Divine. All of the Divine. I'm one of the Father's experiments that didn't make the cut."

"Lucifer made you himself?"

"Yep. I'm the only one of my kind. It sounds like it shouldn't be a bad gig, but it is. Especially being so small. The only reason the others tolerate me at all is because they think I'm a joke."

"It's not easy being green," I said.

"Shut up," he replied. "I don't need you to mock me, too."

"I'm sorry, Zifah."

He nodded. "Don't worry about it. It has its perks."

"We need to hurry."

Zifah ran back to the door, scanning the hallway before dashing out. I followed behind him at a walk, easily keeping pace.

"Up the stairs," he said, pointing to a wide staircase. "Don't be seen."

He started his way across. He paused halfway, pressing himself against a red marble column. Immediately, his skin tone changed to match it. Whatever the other demons thought, that was no joke.

A pair of devils wandered across the hall without noticing Zifah. He finished the evasion, reaching the steps and then waving me forward. I crossed without incident, and we hurried up the stairs to the second level.

The palace was huge, but Zifah navigated it with ease, as though he had been here many times before. We crossed the length of the structure, staying hidden from passing demons and making our way toward the harem. Each step was leaving me more impatient and agitated. I wanted to get Alyx, get the FOG, and get the hell out of Hell.

"It's through there," Zifah said, pointing across one last open hallway to a pair of gold-plated doors. A large demon stood on either side of them, each resting a large ax between the floor and their elbows. "Those are Cain's personal guards. I can get past them,

but you can't."

"You've done this before, haven't you?" I asked.

Zifah nodded enthusiastically. "A room full of damned female souls under Cain's control and the ability to blend in? I'm a demon; I'm not dead."

"Do you have any idea where Cain is?"

"Most likely in his lab. He hasn't spent much time in the harem in the last hundred years or so though his new addition may spark his libido again."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

I was worried enough about it that I didn't even consider being sly about getting past the guards. Instead, I started walking right toward them.

"What the heck are you doing?" Zifah asked, scampering along behind me and pulling at my pant leg. "Maybe you can beat them, but Cain will know something's up."

"Good," I said.

My patience was out, and the discovery of a third way of using my power had made me bold. Let Cain try me again. He wouldn't find me so weak the second time.

The guards caught sight of me a moment later. I spared a glance back at Zifah, who had changed color to blend in. Then I threw my hands out, bringing them back in and using my power as a pair of massive claws. It slammed into the sides of the two demons, picking them up and bashing them into one another. Bones shattered, and they fell to the ground, stunned.

Zifah was on the first in a flash, jamming his needle into an arm and bouncing away before the devil could grab him. I ran at the other one, meeting him as he rose to his feet. I put out my hands, leading with my power and shoving him back again. He went airborne before smashing into the gold doors with enough force to push them open.

The demon got back up, a snarl crossing his snout. I reached forward and then back, pulling him to me and hitting him hard in the gut with an extra-strong fist. He hit the wall to the left of me, cracking the marble and fell to the floor again. Zifah jumped on him, stabbing him with the needle.

"You're pretty handy with that thing," I said.

"It's the only defense I have. It ain't easy being green." His smile was sharp and crooked.

I turned back to the now open doors, hurrying inside. The harem was what I expected it to be. A room of pillows and mattresses, with a large bath in the center. The girls were arranged around it, lounging, bathing, sleeping, and in a few instances pleasing one another. I didn't know how much of their activity was under their own control and how much Cain was making them do. They looked pretty content in their chosen activity.

The other thing I noticed was that there were a lot more of them than I had expected. The souls who had taken Alyx away were only a small fraction of his concubines. There were at least a hundred of them here, all wearing the same gold bracelet.

"Alyx," I said, calling her name and picking through the obstacles in search of her.

"She won't respond to you even if she's here," Zifah said. "These souls are prisoners to Cain's whims."

If she wasn't here, that meant she was with Cain. I could feel my face burning at the rising tide of anger. "Where is his room?"

"Diuscrucis, it's one thing to bully a couple of devils. Cain is something else entirely. He's the son of Lucifer for jeebers sakes."

"The only way we get out of here is through him. Where is his room?"

Zifah didn't look happy as he pointed back the way we had come. "Follow me."

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My heart was thundering, and my blood was boiling by the time we reached Cain's apartment on the top floor of the palace. I had already dispatched more demons than I could count on the way up, and to be honest, I was surprised that my activities hadn't drawn him out.

Was he that distracted by Alyx?

The thought made me sick.

I had told myself I didn't and couldn't love her. I had only known her for a few weeks, and there was still that twinge of guilt every time I thought that maybe there was potential there. What about Charis and Clara? What about those feelings? I knew she would never be mad at me for having an afterlife beyond her. We had settled our love when I set her free.

So what was the problem?

The biggest problem was the fact that she was a demon. In some other part of me it felt shameful to have an interest in one of Lucifer's creations over one of God's. But then, God had created Lucifer, so that still made her one of His, didn't it? And anyway, she

had shown me her heart was innocent enough that she didn't have to be straight evil. Not that evil was always permanent. Mephistopheles had been full demon before he met Josette, and she had changed him.

The other problem was that she was a Great Were. There were positive qualities about it, like her extreme loyalty and protectiveness, as well as her incredible hearing and sense of smell. There were negatives, too. Like the need to feed on human flesh, and the fact that despite everything, I couldn't wonder about falling in love with a girl who could change into the big, bad, wolf.

On the flip side was the way she said, "I love you."

Who wouldn't fall for that?

So maybe I did love her? I didn't know. I wasn't sure. What I did know was that the idea of Cain touching her and forcing her to touch him was enough to drive me over the edge of reason. The thought of anyone or anything hurting her was a sharp knife in my gut. I didn't need to worry about it most times because she was more than able to take care of herself.

Most times.

I wasn't going to let it happen. If it had already happened, I was going to make sure whoever did it regret the decision. It sounded corny and cliche, but it was true.

"Remember brute force?" Zifah said as I approached Cain's door.

I could hear a soft growl on the other side. It was Alyx for sure, in beast mode. She didn't sound happy.

"I remember," I said, gathering my power and throwing it out at the door. It exploded from the brute force, shattering into a thousand splinters.

I walked through the ruined door a man on fire, burning with anger and ready to throw down with Cain. I scanned his apartment. Beyond the door was a large living space with plush sofas and all of that garbage. Past that was a columned archway.

Alyx had fallen silent from the other side of it.

I kept moving, not too fast, not too slow. Zifah had disappeared. He was hiding from Cain, and I was okay with that.

I reached the second room. A massive bed sat in the center of it. Cain was sitting on it, propped up against some pillows and watching my grand entrance with a casual dismissal. Where was Alyx?

I turned my head. He had forced her to change and chained her

to the wall. She was struggling against the bonds, as unable to break them as I had been. The gold bracelet was gone.

"Cain," I rumbled softly.

He answered with a half smile. "Now, how did you get out of my pit?"

"I'm resourceful like that," I replied.

"Ah, I bet you are, Landon. But no, someone released my shackles from you. Who was it?" He made a face like he was thinking, and then he shrugged. "No matter, I'll return you there shortly. Do you like what I've done with your companion. It's been so long since a Great Were came down to Hell, I decided I would rather have a trophy like this than another concubine."

I glanced over at Alyx again. Her eyes were morose, and it broke my heart.

"I'm going to end you," I said.

He laughed. "Still trying to be a champion for the underdog," he said, laughing harder. "Underdog. Get it, Landon?"

He flicked his wrist. I felt his power coming at me, and instead of pushing against it with my own, I relaxed, letting it wash over me. It burned against my skin, and I let it. I urged it to transform and be set free. The burning turned into a tingle, and the tingle of exhilaration.

Cain's eyes narrowed at the reaction, and he threw his hand out. A gout of hellfire spewed from it, heading right toward me, while a second force tried to hold me in place. I negated that force, stepping aside from the hellfire and knowing that it would melt the wall behind me to nothing.

"I learned a new trick, thanks to you," I said.

His pretty face twisted in rage, and he sprang from the bed. As he did, the black spatha appeared in his hand. I knew he had taken it.

I braced myself against him, catching his first sword strike with my power, pushing back and shoving him away. He threw his power at me again, and I balanced it once more, sidestepping a thrust and hitting him hard in the jaw with my fist. His head snapped to the side, and when he looked back at me his eyes were red, and small horns had grown from his forehead.

"You want to fight me, diuscrucis?" he said. "Fight the real me."

And then he grew. Ten feet. Twenty feet. His entire body muscled up while the horns on his head grew up and out. The

spatha fell from his hand, too small to hold.

"Fight all of me," he shouted, his voice echoing across the Desolation as the palace vanished from below my feet. "I am the Son of the Morningstar. This is my world. You can't defeat me here."

I bent down and picked up the spatha from the scorched Earth. I guess he didn't feel like he needed it anymore. I looked back at Alyx. She was still chained to a steel girder that was embedded deep into the ground.

I wondered if Zifah's poison blood would work on Cain?

That was the last thought I had time for. The demon came for me with incredible speed, his large hands sweeping where I was standing, trying to scoop me up. I power-jumped backward, avoiding the grab, and then reversed course, rocketing at him and slipping the spatha against his leg.

It skidded uselessly off his mottled red skin.

I hated boss battles.

Cain charged again, one claw sweeping from the left, the other from the right. I pushed myself up, scaling over them both. Something big and heavy hit me hard in the chest, throwing me away. I hadn't seen that Cain had grown a tail.

I hit the girder above Alyx, leaving a dent, breaking half the bones in my body, and tumbling down. She caught me before I hit the ground, a moment of incredible tenderness as I frantically knitted myself back together.

"I love you," I said, trying it on for size. It felt crazy and good at the same time.

"I love you," she replied, her monster voice deeper but still carrying the same sweet innocence.

I kissed the side of her muzzle, at the same time putting my hand on her collar. It fell to dust.

"Now let's kick his ass," I said.

She snarled in agreement, and I held on while she pounced forward, her own form large enough to even the odds. She knocked his arms aside, digging her hinds into his chest and pushing him back, her jaws seeking his neck. Cain's power swirled around us, attempting to crush us into pulp. I kept my grip on Alyx's back and eased the demon's attack, preventing it from harming her.

"This is my realm," Cain said again, clearly on the defensive. He spun around, trying to shake Alyx loose. She kept her claws dug

into him, holding tight.

“You should have made a deal,” I said. I used my power to keep my balance, coming to a crouch on Alyx’s back before sending myself forward in a leap. I reached up and grabbed one of Cain’s horns, using it as leverage while I stabbed him in the eye.

He howled in pain, stumbling back and falling over. Alyx was relentless, her teeth tearing chunks of his throat away, her claws cutting his chest to ribbons. He was healing from those wounds, but the spatha was another story. His eye steamed and hissed, the angelic scripture active on his flesh.

“No,” he shouted, gathering himself. He grabbed Alyx but the shoulders, lifting her and throwing her back. She flew through the air, landing hard on the ground, yelping as she did.

She didn’t get up.

I rushed Cain as he tried to get back to his knees, his throat closing up, his body healing. I came at him with everything I had, using my power to knock him off balance while leaping back at him with the sword. I jammed it into his neck. Once. Twice. Three times. The wounds all steamed, but he was more powerful than that. He was in Hell, and he was able to overcome the poison.

“I’ve got this.”

I had heard Zifah before I saw him. He appeared on top of Cain, right next to his ear, his tiny needle in hand.

“Maybe they’ll stop laughing now,” he said, jamming the small point of it into the demon’s cheek.

“Zifah?” Cain said, even as his ear dissolved to nothing. “You?” His eyes grew wide with fear, his face beginning to crumble.

“My apologies, brother,” Zifah said. “But you had this coming for a long time. You should have been more careful who you made enemies with. Or at least, who you refused to make friends with.”

Cain tried to say something else, but his lips turned to dust. His head was gone a few seconds later, and I started running toward Alyx before I saw the rest of him die.

His power gone, the palace reappeared below my feet. Alyx was crumpled in the corner, having changed back to her human form.

“Alyx,” I said, kneeling down next to her.

She was breathing shallow, but she was awake. “Did we win?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She smiled. “Good. Did you mean what you said?”

I looked at her. I had never been happier than I was to see she was going to be okay. “Yes.”

Her smile grew larger. “Does that mean we can mate now?”

“Not now. Maybe once we’ve saved the mortal world from Abaddon.”

“Will you kiss me at least?”

I leaned in, putting my lips to hers. She tasted of salt and sweat and blood. She returned the kiss eagerly.

“Ahem,” Zifah said, appearing at my side. We both looked at him. “Got any of that action left for the one who actually destroyed Cain?”

“Come here,” Alyx said.

I started to protest, but she put her hand to my lips. Then she leaned forward and kissed Zifah on the cheek.

“Thank you.”

I had never seen a demon blush before.

“You called Cain, brother,” I said.

“Yeah, because we have the same father. Beyond that, it’s complicated. The point is that I never liked that asshole.”

“What will happen to him?”

“Lucifer will give him a new form and he’ll be bad as new in a few days. I recommend getting out of here.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more. Let’s grab the FOG and go.”

I reached out and helped Alyx to her feet. Then I returned to the pile of ash that was Cain and retrieved the pendant he had said could control the armor. We left the bedroom and headed for the laboratory.

The Fist was mine. Alyx was mine.

It had been a pretty good day.

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We made our way from Cain's bedroom down to the laboratory. The demons had known the moment we destroyed Cain, and they scattered out of our way as we entered, abandoning the Fist of God.

I approached it with a measure of disgust. Adam's creation had caused more trouble in the last few weeks than I had been weighed down by in years.

Of course, it had also led me to Alyx, so it wasn't all bad.

I couldn't use my power on it directly. Instead, I enhanced my strength, climbing onto the table and lifting it from its hooks. I lowered myself gently, holding the large machine over my head. It had to weigh at least a thousand pounds. Probably more.

"Let's go," I said, taking the lead from the room.

I carried the FOG through the corridors and out to the large foyer. We only saw a few demons en route, and they were all fleeing from us as fast as they were able.

"Do you think Lucifer is going to be pissed at me?" I asked.

Zifah had taken a seat on Alyx's shoulder. He shook his head. "No. He probably thinks Cain deserved to be cut down a notch. He's

been plotting to murder Lucifer for years."

"He probably thought he could with the help of the Fist," Alyx said. "Especially if he had managed to get you inside of it."

"Yes," Zifah agreed. "Or if you had put Abaddon into it for him."

I tripped a little bit on my next step, my Divine spider-sense going off at the comment.

"You know about that?"

Zifah could tell he had made me wary. He laughed it off. "I told you, Landon. I can go anywhere without being noticed. I heard you talking to Cain about it in the lab."

"You told me you found me in the dungeon, not that you followed me."

Zifah's laughter faded. "Okay, so I lied a little bit."

Alyx reached up, grabbing the demon in a suddenly larger, sharper hand so that only his head stuck out beyond her fingers.

"Why?" she asked. I could almost feel her protective instinct.

"I didn't want you to know that I knew. Oh, but I messed that up. I helped you beat Cain, doesn't that earn me any credit?"

"Not enough," I said, growing warier. "Are you working with Gervais?"

"Who?"

"Don't tell me you don't know Gervais. He isn't exactly an unknown quantity around here."

Zifah was silent until Alyx squeezed him a little tighter.

"I can smell your fear, little demon," she said.

"You're crushing me to death. Why wouldn't I be afraid? Fine. I know Gervais. And yes, I've seen him recently. He offered to bring me out of Hell if I helped him find a way to get the armor from Cain. I was the one who suggested sending you down here. But I didn't do it for him, I did it for me. I want out of this place; you know that. I don't want to work with him, though. There isn't a demon in the universe that trusts him."

"So you were using me?"

"We all use each other. That's how all this poop works. Especially down here."

He had a point. And I couldn't ignore the fact that he did help me escape, and he was the one who had killed Cain. Sure, he had ulterior motives. Didn't they always? The only thing that was bothering me was that Zifah knew Gervais. More than that, they had discussed the very thing I had just done before I ever knew

about it.

Which meant the demon knew someone had been summoning Abaddon while he was still here in Hell.

“Who summoned Abaddon?” I asked.

“What?”

“You heard me, Zifah.”

“Randolph Hearst. I’m sure you already knew that.”

“I do. I also know he had help. What I don’t know is who helped him?”

“Why do you think I know?”

“Because Gervais told you what was going down before it went down. Gervais said he doesn’t know who the other player is, but he doesn’t have your ability to sneak around down here where the action is. Summoning Abaddon from Hell without inside help? I don’t buy it.”

Zifah released a long, low sigh. “Okay. Yep. I know who his partner is. No, I’m not telling you until you bring me to your plane. If I do, I’ve got no leverage to prevent you from leaving me here.”

“Does Gervais know this mystery demon?”

“No. Like you said, he doesn’t have much clout down here. He’s persona non grata since he sided with the Beast. That’s why he keeps going back to you. Any demon with any self-respect doesn’t want anything to do with him.”

“So you’re saying you have no self-respect?”

“I’m saying I’m desperate. I can’t tell you how much I hate it here, and I’ve been stuck here for almost four hundred years.”

“Are you saying I have no self-respect?”

“I’m not judging you, but if I were in your shoes, I would stick that sword of yours in his heart as soon as possible.”

“I’d love to, but he’s already indicated Lucifer will just send him back up. Do you know the saying, ‘keep your friends close and your enemies closer?’ I’m better off knowing where and who he is.”

“I can’t argue that. So, are we good?”

“As good as we’re going to be. I still don’t trust you.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. Say, can you let me go now?”

Alyx looked over at me, and I nodded. She opened her hand, and he landed gracefully on the floor. We were nearing the front doors of the palace, and I could see the Desolation spreading out beyond it.

“I hope you know how to get back to the train from here.”

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Zifah did know how to get back to the train. He explained the entire process while we walked, but I was tired and didn't pay much attention.

Alyx was kind enough to change to demon form once we had left the palace, and she carried everything on her back across the broken landscape without complaint. I took a position up near her head, stroking her fur and being affectionate. I had admitted to what I felt almost from the day we met, and it felt liberating.

Yeah, she was a monster. But she was my monster.

We arrived back at the train in plenty of time. Many of the demons who had fled the palace had wound up here, and they scattered once more at our approach. I used Zifah to tell them I wouldn't hurt them as long as they didn't try to hurt me, and we somehow wound up managing to blend into the mix by the time the transportation arrived. Sure, we looked strange carrying the Fist of God up onto the train, but none of the demons were about to comment on that. I was sure the word was spreading in a hurry about what I had done to Cain. I had earned their respect and fear,

and I liked it.

The return trip to the Kitchen was going to take two hours. I decided to use the time to rest, putting my arm around Alyx while she nestled her head against my chest. Zifah wandered off at some point, leaving us alone with the FOG spread across the seat in front of us. We didn't need to talk. Not right now. It was enough to have her near.

I closed my eyes. Immediately, I saw Charis in my mind. We were back in the Box, and she was telling me how tired she was of being part of the war between Good and Evil. I could see it like it was still happening, and while I was tempted to release myself from the memory, I decided to remain. Old emotions swelled up again. It was love, but it was a different kind of love than I was feeling for Alyx. It felt old and comfortable, as though it had been pre-ordained. Maybe it had been. We were two of a kind, and shouldn't like attract like? To forgive a pun, Alyx was more of a youthful puppy love. An infectious love like we were a pair of newlyweds. It was different from what I had known, and I was drinking of it without reservation.

I had earned that much, hadn't I?

I held her close and told her I loved her. I brought her from the Box with me, and I released her to the stars. If you love something, you have to let it go. So I did. It was hard not to feel like I was betraying her to love someone else. I didn't want to, but there it was.

"Are you okay?" Alyx asked me, somehow noticing my distress. Was it my heartbeat? A smell of salty tears?

"I was thinking about Charis."

"Was she your mate?"

"Kind of. She had died before we were ever close like that, but I loved her, too."

"Why does that make you sad?"

"I feel guilty."

"Why? It is not improper for an alpha to have multiple mates. It is only natural that the strongest will produce the best offspring."

She wasn't human, so I understood why she didn't understand. Who was to say her perspective wasn't the better one? It would save me a lot of negative emotion.

"Maybe having you makes me miss her more."

"She must have been a fine mate."

I leaned down and kissed her head. “Yes, she was.”
“I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet her.”
“Me, too,” I said.
Strangely enough, I meant it.

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It felt good to get back to the Kitchen though I was surprised to discover that an entire Earth day had passed since we had arrived in Hell.

Time flies when you're having fun, I guess.

Alyx carried the Fist of God while I walked alongside her with Zifah on my shoulder. The damned still crowded the city, but it seemed as though my new reputation had reached their subconscious as well. Instead of forcing us to navigate around them, they steered clear of us. The adulterers ran big circles to avoid us, while the sloths simply stopped moving, standing barefoot in the broken glass and waiting for us to pass.

We returned to the club to wait for Damien to open the rift and take us back. We still had another day before he showed up again. I could only hope nobody knew we were with him, and that he would make it back in one piece. I didn't know what his business in Hell was, other than retrieving artifacts to bring back to the mortal realm. He had done it plenty of times before without issue, so I knew I shouldn't have been too worried. Still, I was feeling pretty

lucky to have beaten Cain and gotten the armor back.

It was only a matter of time before my luck ran out.

Zifah stayed at the front of the club. He said it was to give Alyx and me a little private time, but I wondered if he wanted to watch the action on stage. He was an odd demon; that was for certain. It wasn't only his diminutive size and green skin, but also his apparent refusal or inability to curse, and his overwhelming desire to leave Hell. It was understandable for fiends and former humans to want to go back. It was rare for a demon made in Hell, no matter what their circumstances were.

Alyx and I entered the small room where the Hell Rift was resting. It was too small for her demon-form in there, so I was carrying the Fist. I dropped it over in the corner and heaved a content sigh, happy to finally be able to put it down.

"What a day," I said, turning to face Alyx.

I wasn't even all the way around when her lips found mine and her body pressed into me, shoving me back against the wall. My heart jumped into my throat as I struggled to keep up with her sudden passion, my own kisses barely able to match hers. She was on fire. Ferocious. An animal. I could feel the heat of her, smell the desire on her skin and taste it in her mouth. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

"Alyx," I said, turning my head to speak. Her kisses continued, from my cheek to my ear, to my neck. Her hands ran over my chest. "Alyx."

"I want you," she said in reply.

"I know," I said. I wanted her, too. More than I had ever wanted anything.

That was the problem.

"Alyx. Please stop," I said. I wasn't sure how I got the words out. It was only the smallest sliver of my soul that wanted her to. The rest wanted to tear her clothes off, pull her to the ground, and… I stopped the thought before I finished it.

Alyx didn't wait for me to ask again. She took a step back, her eyes sad. "I thought you loved me?"

"I do. That's why we can't do this like this. Being here is bringing out the evil side of me. I don't know how, but I know it is. I don't know if you understand, but I've never been with anyone before. Not even Charis. I don't want the first time to be on the floor in Hell. You're special to me, and being with you deserves to

be special. Not like the adulterers out there."

She stared at me for a few seconds, and I felt myself growing tense. Would she cry? Would she yell? Would she leave? I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

Finally, her sad eyes turned into the softest, most loving eyes I had ever seen. She did start to cry, but a smile spread across her face at the same time. "Thank you, Landon," she said. "Espanto never made anything special for me. He never treated me like I was special, other than in the ways I could hunt for him. You make me feel like more than a thing and more than a demon."

I moved forward, taking her in my arms. At the moment, she seemed so small. So defenseless. Hardly.

"We'll have time later. I promise."

"Okay."

"There is something else I can do for you before we go back. If Cabal did tip Espanto, they'll both be in for a surprise."

She tilted her head in confusion.

"You need to pull your pants down."

She laughed. "You just said-"

"I know. Not for that."

She grabbed the band of the light pants Cain had left her in, sliding them past her thighs. I looked down at her, fighting against my darker self to avoid the patch of hair in the center and focus on the spot next to it instead.

The spot where Espanto's brand was etched into her skin.

I put my hand on it. She twitched slightly at my touch and then remained still as I traced my finger along the brand. Izaak had been marked by Gervais, and he had managed to remove it by cutting it out of his flesh. We had tried that a couple of times already, and both times the runes had healed back with the skin. Whatever Espanto had done, however he had done it, he had made the brand permanent.

This time would be different. I was smarter now. I had learned something new. I didn't need to heal the brand. I could transform it.

"This might hurt," I said. "I don't know."

"It's okay. It will be worth it."

I closed my eyes, shifting my hand to rest across it. I could feel the heat of the demon's power in the runes. I focused on it, asking it to change. It burned against me, flaring up as if in anger at the effort. Alyx cried out in pain, leaning back against the wall, trying

to pull herself away. I reached back and put my hand on her rear to keep her in place, holding her tight and at the same time working to remain calm. I couldn't force the energy to neutralize. I had to be passive. Delicate.

"Landon," Alyx said, her voice strained with hurt. The flames were burning her legs, moving in a direct line toward her genitals like some kind of crazy safety measure.

"It's okay," I said.

Was it? I wasn't sure. Every part of me was being tempted to push back, to fight fire with fire. I couldn't. I knew that was the wrong thing to do. I stayed the course, keeping pressure on the mark but not forcing any of my power into it. It was a crude, slow negotiation, and the flames continued to move their way downward. I could smell her burning pubic hair, and she whimpered and shook against my grip.

"Landon," she said again, growing panicked.

"It will be okay," I repeated, keeping my voice calm.

It would be. It had to be. I relaxed further, feeling the heat against my palm begin to cool, the power beginning to morph.

The flames lowered in intensity before reaching her sex. My hand was growing ever cooler, sucking every bit of demonic energy from the scar and turning it into something raw. Alyx began to relax in my grip, breathing heavily.

Within a minute, the flames were out. The brand on her skin would never heal, but the power held within it was gone.

She was free.

She leaned back against the wall, sobbing. I stood up, wrapping my arms around her and holding her tight while she buried her head in my neck. There was such an odd contrast between this tiny, vulnerable thing in my arms and the creature she could become.

"It's okay now," I said, kissing her head.

"Yes," she replied. "I know. I'm not crying because I'm afraid or hurt. I'm crying because I'm happy. The last time I felt like this was the night before Espanto came and took me away, when I felt warm and safe in bed with my brothers and sisters."

"He can't take you away from me again," I said.

She moved back away from me, a feral smile creasing her lips. "I'd love to see him try."

I nodded, and then reached out and pulled her pants back up.

"Are you sure?" she asked playfully.

“Yes,” I replied with a laugh. “We can sit together. We can talk. I’d love to hear more about your life before Espanto.”

“Okay.”

I was positioning myself to sit with my back to the wall when I heard a commotion from the club.

“What is it?” I asked, knowing Alyx could smell and hear whatever was happening out there.

“I’m not sure. I don’t see how this can be possible.”

“How can what be possible?”

She opened her mouth to respond. At the same time, a bruised and bloody Gervais swept into the room.

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“Gervais?” I said, completely confused and off-guard. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Zifah appeared a moment later, racing along after the fiend.

“Landon,” Gervais said, his expression and voice more serious than I had ever seen it. “We have a problem.”

That was the second or third time I had heard that in the last twenty-four hours. It didn’t make me happy.

“Where is Elyse?” I asked.

“That is the problem. She’s dead. So is your sweet flower by any other name.”

I instantly lost all ability to move, or to think or to breathe. My entire body fell to mush, and I opened my mouth to try to express something, anything.

It was impossible.

“I don’t believe you,” I said. “This is just another one of your bullshit games.”

My mind was reeling, my entire body was numb. I was too shocked to cry. I felt Alyx’s hands on my shoulders, supporting me.

“I don’t blame you for being doubtful diuscrucis. That doesn’t make it any less true. Look at me. Not only am I here, but I am beaten and bloody. They killed me, too.”

I heard the words like an echo across time. I tried to look at the demon, but my eyes refused to focus. This wasn’t real. This couldn’t be real. It was a trick. Lucifer was having fun with me, hurting me in the most productive way he could.

“How?” I heard Alyx say behind me. Her voice was ice.

“Elyse followed me into the deli. She didn’t think I saw her, but I did. I see everything, you know. She was shot in the head by the clerk. He had a pistol hidden behind his counter. Rose was with her. She killed the clerk, but then one of the shoppers attacked her and hit her over the head with a bottle. I tried to protect her. I knocked the shopper down, but before I knew it, I was jumped by a man who came into the deli from the street. He didn’t say a word to me, just hopped on my back and dragged me down.”

“You’re telling me some unarmed mortal killed you?” I said, my voice angry. There was no part of this that was making sense. I knew the clerk at the deli. His name was Ahmed, and he had a wife and three kids. He knew Elyse, too. I had brought her in with me more than once.

“No. Not that one. I broke his neck. By the time I got to my feet, two vampires had grabbed me, and Randolph Hearst walked in. He said, ‘I told Landon not to interfere. Does he think I’m stupid? Finding another way to steal Abaddon still counts as interfering.’ Then he cut my throat with a cursed dagger, the son of a whore.”

“He knew who you were?”

“He’s been stalking us the entire time, mon frère. Somehow, he heard everything I said to you.”

Shit.

I closed my eyes as if it would drown me out from existence. I was in Hell, but the true hell was back home. Elyse, dead? Rose, dead? Just like that? No fight? No fanfare? Just gone? Hearst was bolder than I had given him credit for. It meant he had a lot of confidence in the power he was stealing from Abaddon. Either that or he was going to fulfill his promise to set the demon free.

“This is all my fault,” I said, my jaw clenching in uncontrolled anger.

“Yes, it is,” Gervais replied.

“Shut up,” Alyx said. “It is not. Landon, you can’t watch

everything all the time."

"I have to," I shouted, pulling away from her. "That's my job. To watch everything. To stop everything before it gets out of hand. This is getting out of hand." I turned and threw my fist into the stone wall. Mortar exploded from it, coating me with a layer of dust. "Son of a bitch. I'm going to kill that worm."

"And I would be happy to assist you," Gervais said. "I lost months of gathering my power to that little shit. Oh, and the way Lucifer laughed at me for it. He sent me back out here, naked and unarmed. I only found you because every demon down here is talking about how you killed Cain. Which is impressive, by the way."

"He didn't do it alone," Zifah said.

Gervais noticed the demon for the first time. "You?" he said, surprised.

"Yes, me. I'm going back with Landon. We have a deal."

Gervais looked at me. "Landon, don't tell me you made a deal with this little pissant?"

"I did," I said, still trying to straighten my head. "He helped me defeat Cain and get the Fist. I owe him."

"But, you can't," Gervais said.

"Why not?" I snapped.

"Zifah is a worse trouble-maker than I am. Mark my words, diuscrucis. If you bring him to the mortal realm, you will regret it."

"But I won't regret it if I bring you?"

"I don't need you to bring me. I've been banished."

"He's full of poop, Landon," Zifah said. "I told you; nobody down here will listen to a thing he says. I don't want to make trouble. I just want to go somewhere that I won't be treated like dirt."

"I'm not the one who is full of it. Landon, I know we have had our differences, but I am telling you the truth."

"Will both of you shut up?" I said. The two demons fell silent. I opened my eyes, glaring at them both. "I don't care about either one of you right now. You can both stay in Hell, or you can both come with me. At this moment the only thing I want to do is find Randolph Hearst and rip his head off."

They were both silent. A dozen quick heartbeats passed.

"Landon, can I say one thing?" Zifah said.

"I don't know. Is it useful?"

“It might be. It’s about your friends.”

“What about them?” My voice was still full of venom. I couldn’t help myself.

“I know what killed them. Or who killed them. Whatever. It was Hearst’s partner.”

“You know who that is?” Gervais said.

“Yeah. I was going to wait until we got out of Hell, but seeing as how we’re all here together like this, and you’ve already kinda been primed for bad news-“

“Who?” I said impatiently.

“What do you know about ghosts?” Zifah asked.

“That they aren’t real. Who, Zifah?”

“They are real, Landon. Very real. And they can possess any mortal they want to. They can control their bodies and make them do anything they want them to. Like shoot someone, for example.”

Gervais’ expression changed. “You know this for a fact?”

“Yeah. I do. I got wind of it through Cain. She’s been making deals with demons left and right, and promising them all a bit of Abaddon’s power.”

“Damn it, Zifah,” I shouted. “Who?”

“It’s Rebecca, Landon,” Gervais said. “He’s talking about Rebecca.”

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“What?” I said my voice a harsh whisper of disbelief.

The last time I had seen Rebecca was in the Box. She had helped me defeat the Beast. She had told me she was trying to change.

I had told her to be good.

This was being good?

“How do you know it’s her?” I said.

“There’s only one ghost I know of with the pedigree to get a demon to do anything for them,” Gervais said. “And that is Rebecca.”

“The word down here is that she thought she was going to go to Heaven after she saved you from the Box,” Zifah said. “She figured that saving God from the Beast was a pretty strong item to put on her resume. I wasn’t there, and this is all rumor, hearsay, and gossip, but apparently she went to ask God about letting her in, and He basically told her no.

“You would think that would have driven her to try a little harder, and for a while it did. She set about saving kittens from trees and stopping people from being raped and all that poop. She

went back a second time, and He said no a second time. She got pissed about being denied, and here we are."

I shook my head. "No. That can't be. She was stabbed with the Redeemer. Her soul became good."

"Souls can change, Landon," Alyx said. "You know that better than anyone."

"This was different. The sword changed her."

"There is no difference," Gervais said. "She was given a new start, but she still had the choice. She's angry at God for denying her. That is the only thing that makes sense."

"Because she didn't earn it," I said. I knew that was how Josette would have responded. "You can't just buy your way into Heaven with good deeds. It takes time and patience to prove your worthiness. Patience never was one of her strengths."

First she had saved me, and then she had betrayed me. Then she had saved me again. And now she had killed at least one of my closest friends and was making another massive power play.

Everything was coming full-circle.

I didn't like it.

* * *

"We need to get back, now. I need to find Rose, and then I'm going to pay another visit to Hearst."

"You need to be careful, Landon," Gervais said. "Hearst is not the same as when you left."

"I've only been gone a day."

"No. You've been gone a week."

It had only felt like a day to me.

"Time is similar between Hell and Earth, but different," Zifah said, noticing how confused I was. "There isn't really a parallel. Sometimes a day is a day; sometimes it isn't. Lucifer controls all of that."

"He controls time?"

"Down here? Yes. God cast him down to this realm and gave him full power over it."

"And he thought it would be fun to mess with your sense of things," Gervais said. "He enjoys watching you."

"Great. I'll have to put that on my marketing material. When you say Hearst isn't the same, you mean what, exactly?"

“He’s been taking in Abaddon’s power,” Gervais said. “Him and his top flunkies. They’re stronger than a regular vampire, and their touch kills instantly.”

That didn’t sound good. “What about Rebecca?”

“A ghost can’t take in power,” Zifah said. “They’re in between worlds. She won’t be able to level up through Abaddon.”

“How is being a ghost different from being in Purgatory? Also, if she’s always only a ghost, why would Hearst keep working with her now that he’s über?”

“Purgatory is for two kinds of people,” Gervais said. “There are the ones who are serving penance for lighter sins, who work off their penance there for a few hundred years before going to Heaven. Then there are the ones that neither Heaven or Hell wants. Ghosts are stuck in the mortal world because they have unfinished business that will direct them to Heaven or Hell.”

“So Rebecca got stuck when the Beast killed her? Why?”

“I would say it was because she felt responsible for freeing the Beast. This would have been much easier if you had let him destroy everything. Or if you had let me take his power.”

“So you could destroy everything?”

“I wouldn’t have destroyed it. I would have used it as my personal playground.”

Like that was so much better. “Okay, fine. Rebecca is stuck as a ghost, and now she’s back to being a super-bitch. Why would Hearst keep her around?”

“She’s immune to Abaddon’s power, for one,” Zifah said. “She’s immune to pretty much everything. You can’t kill a ghost. You can exorcise them, banish them, which sends them a few thousand miles away. You can’t end them. For another, she can control any mortal who isn’t protected.”

“Think of what you can do with that, diuscrucis,” Gervais said. “President. General. Deli clerk.”

“The perfect assassin,” I said.

“On both sides,” Gervais agreed. “She can kill Hearst if he isn’t compliant unless he never wants to leave his house again.”

“There has to be a way to spot them. A P.K.E meter or something.”

“There are ways, but they are only open to mortals. I’ve heard the Nicht Creidem know a way. It may be that you can see them. I don’t know.”

“I’ve never seen one before.”

“Despite the television shows to the contrary, ghosts are incredibly rare. It may be that you have simply never crossed paths with one.”

“Or it may be that Rebecca has been watching us since I visited Hearst and I didn’t know it.”

“That is also possible.”

I really, really didn’t like this. Things had been calm for almost two years, and now it seemed like the entire universe was blowing up in my face again.

“What are your intentions, Gervais?” I asked, staring at the fop-haired demon.

He put a hand to his chest as if offended. “My intentions? Why Landon, you wound me. My intentions are to help you put a stop to this. Of course, I still want to take over the mortal realm and kill you, but I can’t do that if someone else takes it first. We are allies, for now, though I don’t know what use I can be to you.”

I wasn’t sure what use he could be either, but it was like I told Zifah. I needed him close to keep an eye on him.

“What about you, Zifah? I’ll bring you back. What then?”

“After I get tired of internet porn?” he asked, laughing until he saw no one else was. “I’d be happy to hang out with you and help, but if I think I’m going to die, I’m out of there. Sorry, Landon, but I waited too long to get away from Hell to come back that easy.”

“What if I promise to come back to get you?” I asked.

He wrinkled his snout. “Mmmmm… Maybe we can work something out.”

“Good enough. Gervais, let’s go.”

“What about Damien?” Alyx asked.

“I don’t think he’ll care that we left without him.”

Gervais knelt in front of the stones, putting his hands on them. He whispered something, and they burst into flames.

“Ladies first,” he said, motioning for me to step in. Instead, I shoved him from behind, pushing him into the Rift.

I lifted the Fist of God with my power and followed him through.

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We came out of the Rift in Cabal's underground compound, just like I knew we would. The fiend wasn't present, but one of his mortal followers was. She jumped at our sudden appearance, taking three steps toward the door before regaining her composure.

"Where is Damien?" she asked.

"Don't know, don't care," I replied. I needed to find Rose, not waste time on this. "Where is Cabal?"

"Up in the club."

I kept my grip on the armor, carrying it out into the underground passages.

"Do you smell Espanto?" I asked.

"No, but the odor of sex and blood is strong down here. It is hiding other scents."

"Landon? Where are we going?" Gervais said. "Why did we come out here? We should have arrived in Central Park."

"The Rift was bound to this location," I replied. "I made a deal with Cabal for the trip down. I'm going to deliver the payment and get him to send us to New York."

“Cabal? That weak-willed snot? I’m disappointed in the class of demons you’re throwing in with nowadays, Landon.” Gervais shot a glance over at Zifah, who flipped him the bird.

“It’s your fault for lowering my standards so much,” I replied, getting a chuckle from Zifah.

We emptied out into the club. The music was thumping, and I expected to be greeted with a full house and a partial view of a breast or ass, or any combination of the same.

The stage was empty.

The tables and chairs had almost all been removed.

There was one left front and center. Cabal was sitting at it, leaning back in his seat with his arms crossed behind his head, looking like he didn’t have a care in the world.

Espanto was sitting next to him.

Over a hundred demons, weres, and vampires waited on the outskirts.

I don’t know if we had just walked into a trap because I was expecting something like it and that would indicate I was caught completely-off guard. It didn’t matter. He was here, and from the looks of things he had brought a veritable army to bring me down.

My eyes flicked over to Alyx. She hadn’t been able to spot him past the other scents, which I had no doubt had been planted for that very reason. Now she stared at him, her eyes big, her face stone.

“There you are,” Espanto said, putting his attention on Alyx. He pushed his seat back and got to his feet. “Come here, my darling. I’ve missed you.”

I felt my heart begin to thud in excited anticipation at his confusion and then fear when Alyx didn’t respond to him.

Instead, I was confused when she began walking forward.

“Alyx?” I said.

She didn’t seem to hear me. She went over to Espanto, and he put his arms around her and wrapped her in a solid embrace.

I didn’t know what was happening. I was sure that I had drawn the power from the brand. She wasn’t under his control anymore. She couldn’t have been. Then why had she gone to him?

“Alyx,” I said again, louder this time. There was no reaction.

“She isn’t yours, diuscrucis,” Espanto said, looking at me over her shoulder. “She’s mine. You had no right to take my wife from me.”

I felt my heart sinking. I had neutralized the brand. I knew I had. The only other explanation was that she had been playing me the entire time. That she was being the demon and lying to me, just like Rebecca.

"I'm so happy to see you again," Espanto said, running his hand over her rear. She nuzzled his neck, growling softly.

I watched them, feeling stupid and jealous. How could I have fallen for that again? How could I be so dumb? I was supposed to know better than this by now.

I swallowed my heart and shook it off. No. I wasn't being dumb. Alyx's loyalty was real. Her love was real. Maybe she could fake the sexual interest. She couldn't fake the way she had protected me. The fury. The strength. It was the doubt that was stupid.

I loved her. Foolish or not, demon or not, I trusted her.

"I see you've brought me something," Espanto said. "A Fist of God. That's what they call it, yes? I appreciate the gift." His eyes shifted to Gervais. "And you? I owe you."

He kissed Alyx on the cheek, and then gently turned her around to face us.

"Alyx. Kill them all."

"Yes, Master," she said. She began to grow and change, shifting into her demon form.

"Landon, remember what I said about dying?" Zifah said, vanishing from sight.

Alyx stood in front of us, huge and frightening. She bared her teeth, snarling viciously.

I didn't reach for the stone to summon the sword.

I didn't gather my power.

Instead, I stood before her and smiled.

"I love you," I said, showing her that I believed in her.

She smiled back as best she could in that form. Then she turned on Espanto, scooping him up in a massive claw.

"You don't own me anymore," she growled.

Espanto's eyes widened, clearly confused. "I do own you. I branded you."

"Your brand is powerless."

"That isn't possible."

"No? How do you explain this?"

She grabbed his head with her other claw and tore it from his body. Then she dropped both to the floor.

Cabal finally got to his feet. He had betrayed me to Espanto as expected, and now he was faced with a very angry Great Were.

"Kill them," he shouted to the assembled demons, his voice heavy with fear. He drew a dagger, holding it in front of himself as if it would be worth anything against Alyx.

The other demons started forward, but it was obvious they didn't really want to get involved. I considered letting it happen anyway. A hundred dead demons would help the balance overall. I was in a hurry. I needed to know what had happened to Rose. If she was in trouble, I needed to help her.

"Cabal, wait," I said. "I don't want to fight you."

I dug my hand into my pocket and pulled out the stone. I rubbed in between my fingers, for a moment hesitant to give it to him. It had belonged to Elyse, and now she was dead. It was all I had left of her. That, and memories.

I tossed the stone to the fiend. The memories would have to do.

"Take it. I need to get back to New York. The business with Espanto is over. Alyx is her own demon, and I don't think you want to suggest otherwise."

Cabal caught the stone. He eyed it for a second and then put up his hand. "Very well. Consider the deal complete. I don't want a fight with you, diuscrucis. I like to pick battles I know I can win."

"You can get us to New York?" I asked.

He nodded. "I have a Rift. I will open it for you."

Alyx changed back to human form. She had a large smile on her face, and she seemed as though a massive weight had been lifted from her.

Cabal glanced over at her with terror in his eyes. A free Great Were was always something to fear.

"I had no choice," he said. "He would have killed me if he knew I had seen you and didn't tell him."

"I know," Alyx said. "Don't cross me again, and we'll have no problem with each other."

"Of course," Cabal replied, his eyes shifting to the pile of ash where Espanto's head had been. "Will you be claiming his territories and assets?"

"It's her right," I said.

"As long as she can defend it," Cabal said. "And I believe she can. As you know, I have served under Espanto for a number of years. I would be pleased to continue my service under the new

mistress."

Alyx looked surprised and confused. "Me? Mistress? Landon, what should I do?"

"She accepts," I said. "She also demands a show of allegiance in the form of a gift."

Alyx and Cabal both looked at me with unknowing faces. I could hear Gervais snickering behind me.

"Well played, diuscrucis," he whispered.

I hadn't planned it that way, but it worked out.

"What kind of gift?" Cabal asked, growing uncomfortable.

Alyx glanced over at me, and then flashed a smile, finally catching on. "I'll take the sword," she said.

"What? But-"

"It's your choice, Cabal. The sword or your life. I'm sure I can put this operation to good use."

For a second, I thought he was going to give the attack order again. I knew he didn't want to. It was all to not look weak in the eyes of his subordinates.

Except they all looked weak in front of Alyx and me.

"Fine," he said at last, flipping the stone to Alyx. She caught it and tossed it back to me.

"I want you to go to Espanto's home in Spain," Alyx said to Cabal. "First, set all of his slaves free. Then figure out what his assets are and prepare a report. I expect it to be complete, and I will likely audit the results, so don't even think of cheating me."

"Yes, Mistress."

"Also, if you have any slaves of your own, they are to be freed at once."

Cabal's face blanched. "But, Mistress, I'll be ruined."

"Offer them pay for their work. Some will stay."

He bowed his head. "Yes, Mistress."

I was impressed. Alyx was taking to her new status like she was born for it. In the back of my mind, I hoped the power wouldn't go right to her head. She had been a Great Were for some time, and it hadn't, but this was her first true taste of freedom.

"Now, show us to the rift. We have business in New York. I'll return here when it is done to check on your progress." She held out her hand, allowing it to grow into a large claw. "Do not disappoint me, Cabal."

The fiend was shaking visibly. His lackeys had also shied away,

trying to vanish in the dark corners.

"As you wish, Mistress."

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Cabal's rift transported us instantly to Central Park, to a small circle of stones hidden inside Belvedere Castle.

"We can throw the Fist in Turtle Pond," I said. "We can get it when we need it."

"A fine idea," Gervais said.

I focused my power, reaching out toward the armor to lift it from the ground.

"Diuscrucis!"

Abaddon's voice filled my head, a shout so loud I raised my hands to my head without thinking, groaning and stumbling.

It was Gervais who caught me this time, getting his arms under mine and holding me up.

"Where have you been?" Abaddon demanded.

"Hell," I replied. "Finding a way to stop this."

"They take my power. It is mine. Release me."

"I'm working on it. I told you-"

"You take too long, diuscrucis! I grow impatient. I grow weary. I will not wait much longer."

I could feel the blood running out of my nose and ears. I could taste it in my mouth.

"You're going to kill me," I said.

"A warning only, diuscrucis. I can kill you, and I will if you delay any longer."

"Then you'll never be free."

"Neither will you."

His power vanished from my soul as quickly as it came. I pushed myself away from Gervais and spat blood onto the ground.

"Landon?" Alyx asked, concerned.

"I'm okay, Allie. Abaddon is getting restless, thanks to the week it took me to get in and out of Hell. He said he won't wait much longer."

"What does that mean?" Zifah asked.

"It means he will break himself out of his prison, and he will eat the world," Gervais said.

"You think he can get out on his own?" I asked.

"By now? Yes. He is waiting."

"Why?"

"I do not know. Why don't you ask him?"

I wasn't about to invite him in again. Instead, I wrapped my power around the Fist and lifted it, carrying it out of the castle and dropping it over the center of the small pond. It was late, but there were still people in the park, and they turned to see what splashed in the water. They were too late to actually see it.

"Alyx, we need to find Rose. Can you pick up her scent?"

"I will try. We should go back to where she was last seen."

I looked at Gervais. "Lead the way, mop-top."

He made a face at me before taking off at an inhuman speed. Alyx shifted beside me, and I climbed onto her back while Zifah rode my shoulder. It reminded me of that homeless man I had seen that had a rat who rode a cat who rode a dog.

The universe was crazy that way.

We got back to my place with fifteen minutes. I dismounted from Alyx, and she returned to human form. Then we made our way over to the deli.

There was police tape across the entrance, and it had been shuttered and locked down. I broke the tape and pulled the metal gate away with my power, and we made our way inside.

"Anything?" I asked Alyx.

“So many smells,” she replied. “She was here. She was afraid. Very afraid. She went this way.”

We followed her through the store. There were broken bottles and cans laying on the floor, and the police had drawn a chalk outline around where Elyse had fallen. I stared at it as we passed, feeling a wave of sadness and regret wash over me. She was so young, and her involvement with me had gotten her killed.

It had gotten a lot of people killed.

We went to the storage room in the back of the location, through an emergency exit and out into the back of an alley. Alyx stopped when she reached it, shaking her head.

“I don’t know. It’s been too long.”

I turned to Gervais. “How long ago did this happen?”

“Three days.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me that beforehand?”

Gervais shrugged. “It slipped my mind, in the middle of being tortured and beaten by the demons in Hell.”

Three days was forever right now.

Rose was gone.

“How are we going to find her?” Alyx asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied, feeling sick. “I just don’t know.”

“I can find her,” Zifah said. “Do you have something that belongs to her?”

“Not here. I do back at my place. How are you going to find her with that?”

“A spell. A demonic spell. Witchcraft, actually. I can bind the object to her, and it will grow hotter the closer we get to her location.”

“Will it work if she’s dead?” I asked.

“Not unless she’s in Hell. But that’s the only way it won’t work.”

“Since when did you become a witch?” Gervais asked.

“The proper term for a male is Warlock,” Zifah said.

“Since when did you become a witch?” Gervais repeated.

“I’ve had years to practice. Unlike yourself, who failed miserably at every scheme you concocted and wound up banished from Hell for it.”

“Can both of you shut up?” I said, stopping them before they could get going. They both fell in line in an instant. “Alyx, can you take these two back to the apartment and give Zifah one of Rose’s t-shirts?”

“Panties would be better,” Zifah said.

“T-shirts,” I said again. “If either of them give you any trouble, you have my permission to send them back to Hell.”

“Of course,” Alyx said. “What are you going to do?”

“The Nicht Creidem know how to see ghosts, and I don’t. I need to change that.” I stepped over to her and kissed her. “I’ll be back soon.”

She rubbed her face against my neck for a second, suggesting that her freedom hadn’t changed her in any bad ways. “Be careful.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m too pissed to get killed.”

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I had to hail a dozen cabs before I got the one that was being driven by Joey Lincoln. Half of them were plain old ordinary mortal driven while the rest were a mix of the Touched and the Turned. I didn't tell any of them who I was, and they had no idea on their own. They drove me the short distance I requested an dropped me off without any trouble. I wasn't looking for trouble from cabbies.

Only from Rebecca.

I still couldn't believe that she had done this. Well, there was a part of me that definitely could believe it. After all, I had fallen for her with little to no background information on who she was or what most demons were like. She just happened to be the first thing I had bumped into during my sojourn into defending humankind, and I had been an easy mark.

The ghost thing? That was something else entirely. She had been stabbed by the Redeemer. Her soul had been cleansed, and God had given her a second chance. She had done well to help save me, and to help save the universe, and yeah, maybe God should have given her a little more credit for that. But maybe He had also seen inside

of her, to the true depths of her being where that resident evil still lurked. I wasn't pretending to be good while at the same time thinking evil. I wasn't pretending to be either. I had my strengths and my faults, my benefits and my vices. I got mad when I didn't get what I wanted, too, but I didn't plot the end of the world in retaliation.

"Joey," I said, sliding into the back seat.

He turned his head to look at me, surprised. "Do I know you?"

"Yes, but you wouldn't remember. My name is Landon."

He kept looking at me. It still wasn't registering. "Okay. What can I help you with, Landon?"

"I need to see your boss."

"What boss?"

I didn't have time to play the game. I decided to be blunt.

"You're Nicht Creidem. I'm the diuscrucis. Take me to your leader."

His eyes grew wide, and he stammered out an affirmation. "Uh… oh… okay."

We pulled away from the curb. He was a little erratic at first, struggling to contain his anxiety and keep the cab within the lines.

"Relax," I said. "I'm not going to hurt you. To be honest, I need your help."

"You do?"

"What do you know about ghosts?"

"You mean spirits? Or, like, Slimer?"

"More like spirits."

"Not much. I know they're real, but ninety-five percent of people who say they've seen one haven't."

"Have you ever seen one?"

He laughed. "Me? No. I heard there's one that's been spotted around the city a few times in the last couple of weeks." He paused. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this."

He had already told me enough. That ghost had to be Rebecca. "Who spotted it?"

He didn't say anything.

"Joey, I can either listen to you answer my questions, or I can kill you right now."

His face paled. "Don't you need me to take you to my boss?"

"I have other ways to find people. I thought this would be faster, and I'm in an awful hurry. This ghost that you said has been

spotted? She killed one of my best friends three days ago."

"Are you kidding?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding? Have the Nicht Creidem figured out that Abaddon is back in play yet?"

"I had heard some rumors about something like that."

"They aren't rumors. He's here, right now, and the ghost knows where he is."

"Shit."

"You can say that again."

"Shit. I hope I don't get busted back to bicycle messenger for this. We've got a guy. His name is Bradford. He's got these sigils on his forehead. He calls them his third eye. Said he initially lifted it from a tattoo mag because he thought it looked cool, not because it let him see ghosts."

"Where is Bradford?"

"I'm taking you to him. He's not the boss man, but he's been a Nicht for a long time, and he's pretty badass. I'm sure Bianca will let you talk to him, once you tell her what you told me."

A tattoo on the forehead. Elyse had once had something similar, until her father burned it off her, along with all her hair.

"How long will it take to get there?"

"We have to head over to Jersey City. You're lucky it's late, or it would take forever."

"Just get us there as fast as you can, unless you want to watch everything in the city die."

"My city? No way." His foot dropped further on the accelerator, and we raced ahead.

"Hey, do you have a cell I can borrow?" I asked, pulling mine from my pocket. It hadn't survived Hell.

He leaned forward, opened the glove compartment, and pulled out an old candy bar cell. He tossed it back at me. "It's a prepaid. I keep it for situations just like this." He laughed. "Not like this, exactly. For normal riders who need to make a call and have a dead phone."

I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes, trying to remember Alichino's number. Once I had it, I gave him a call.

"Yeah, what do you want?" The checkered demon's voice was raspy and tired.

"Alichino. It's Landon."

"Who?"

“Landon Hamilton.”

I waited a few seconds for the name to resonate. “Oh, hey Landon. It’s been a long time since-” He paused. “No, wait. Just checked my log. It hasn’t been that long. What can I do for you?”

“Is Dante there?”

“Nope. I haven’t seen him in three days.”

I felt a stream of cold rush through me. The timing couldn’t be a coincidence.

“I have a feeling he might be in trouble,” I said.

“Dante? How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. What were you two working on the last time you saw him?”

“He wanted me to see if I could find a way to destroy Abaddon. I guess he’s back in town?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Tell me about it. Yeah, so I’ve been doing a ton of research. I’m talking, comb the entire internet, hack into a few intranets, and scan the darknet research. Not specifically about Abaddon, but how to destroy the soul of a demon completely enough that it can never return.”

“What did you find?”

“As far as I can tell, it can’t be done. I mean, there was the Redeemer that could turn the demon good, but that’s not the same thing.”

“And the Redeemer is gone.”

“There is that. I haven’t found any other way.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear. At least I had the Fist to try to trap Abaddon.

“Alichino, do me a favor and see what you can dig up on ghosts. From what I’ve heard, they can’t be destroyed, only banished. That’s not good enough for me.”

I didn’t like the idea of ending Rebecca, even now. She wasn’t leaving me with much of a choice.

“You all like to keep asking me to do the impossible, don’t you?” the demon said. “Why don’t you just ask me how to solve the freaking Hodge conjecture?” He hissed into the phone. “Fine. I’ll see what I can do. You’re going to find Dante, right?”

I had a feeling I knew where Dante was. The same place Rose was. Maybe the same place Rebecca and Abaddon were.

The question was whether he was a prisoner or not. He couldn’t

stay out of Purgatory long without losing his power, so I was very much hoping for not.

"I'm going to try," I said.

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Joey drove the cab through a roll-up and down a ramp, into a garage full of other cabs. The place was dingy and ugly and smelled like motor oil and urine. I was glad Alyx wasn't here. I could only imagine how she would react to the smell.

The hood on one of the other cabs was open, and someone in overalls was leaning in, working on something. Joey gave the horn a quick burst to get their attention, and they straightened up and looked our way.

A pixie-haired, narrow woman who could have been easily mistaken for a junkie or a bulimic stared through the windshield at us. Joey stopped the cab a few feet away from her.

"That's Bianca," he said.

"She's the head of this Chapter?"

"Yes."

"And she's fixing cars?"

"She says it relaxes her."

I opened the door to the cab and climbed out. Getting a closer look at Bianca, I could see the slight resemblance to Elyse. The

Nicht Creidem had spent hundreds of years building their immunity to the Divine, and limited inbreeding were only one of the ways they had achieved it.

"Joey," she said.She didn't look happy that he had brought a passenger. "What is this?"

"This is the diuscrucis," I said, walking toward her. "Landon Hamilton. It's a pleasure." I put out my hand. It was a flippant way to introduce myself, but I wanted to see how she would react.

She reacted by making a blessed dagger appear from somewhere and using it to slice a neat line across my outstretched palm.

"Ouch," I said, closing my hand to keep the blood from dripping on the floor. I healed the wound and opened my hand again. "I'm not a demon, and if I were an angel, I'd be able to attack you right now."

She dropped the dagger on the floor. "It really is you."

"Yes."

"Why are you here?"

"He wants to talk to Bradford," Joey said.

"Bradford?"

"I'm hunting a ghost," I said.

She nodded. "Funny. So are we."

Sometimes it was a good thing when my goals aligned with the Nicht Creidem's. Sometimes it wasn't.

"Why do you want her?"

"How do you know it's a female?" By her reaction, I would guess she hadn't.

"I know a lot of things. It's my job."

"It's my job, too," Bianca said. "And if the diuscrucis is involved, I want to know. Who is she?"

"You give me something, I give you something," I said.

"I figured as much." She picked up a rag sitting on the fender and wiped off her hands. Then she slammed the hood closed and gestured for me to follow her. "I'm sure you already know about Abaddon?"

"Yes."

"And you know Randolph Hearst is involved," She said it as a statement of fact.

"I made a deal with him not to interfere. Then I interfered. He didn't like that. He and the ghost killed my friend. You might have known her. She used to be one of yours. Joe's daughter, Elyse."

She nodded while she opened the door to the offices behind the garage. “I knew her. We met a couple of times while she was hunting for relics. I heard she got shot by a deli clerk. I was suspicious, but now it makes sense.”

We moved past the offices, to a locked door in the back. She knocked a beat out on it, and it opened a moment later.

“It’s okay, Rudy,” she said as we walked past the guard, a big guy who reminded me of Obi. “He’s with me.”

We began to descend a stairwell.

“What’s your play in this, diuscrucis?” she asked.

“The usual. Stop Hearst, get rid of Abaddon, avenge my friend. There have been a few complications, but I’m managing.”

“Are you?”

I shrugged. “I’m trying to. That’s why I’m here.”

“You can’t see ghosts, and you can’t fight something you can’t see.”

“Exactly.”

We kept going down for a hundred feet or so. There was another guard stationed at the bottom of the steps, and he knocked another pattern on the door to have a third guard open it.

“You’ve got a lot of security in here,” I said. “Expecting trouble?”

“We’re always expecting trouble.”

I called her on it with a sidelong glance that told her I knew she was lying.

“Fine. We’re worried about how Hearst is going to move. This is a power grab unlike anything I’ve seen before, and even HQ is worried about the fallout. Now you’re telling me Hearst bought you off-”

“He didn’t buy me off. I bought myself some time. At least, I thought I did.” That move hadn’t worked out. At all.

“Well, you knew what he was doing, and you didn’t stop him-”

I interrupted her a second time. “You don’t think I would have if I could? Like I said, there have been some complications.”

We were in a long corridor with doors on either side. Bianca stopped at one of them and knocked.

“Now you’re here because you need our help,” she said. “And I’m inclined to help you because neither one of us wants the world to end. At least not if it isn’t on our terms.”

Nobody answered the door. She knocked again.

“Come on, Bradford,” she shouted.

We waited another ten seconds. Finally, she took a step back and kicked the door. It bent off the hinges, collapsing inside.

“Whoa. Shit. What the hell?”

Bradford was in the room, laying on his bed, headphones over his ears and a comic book in his hand. He was naked, sort of. He had no hair and wasn’t wearing any clothes, but he had so many tats and scars that there was no way to tell where the flesh was below it.

He shifted and sat up, pulling the headphones off. “Geez, B. You almost made me piss myself. And I was laying down, so that would have been messy.” He grabbed a pair of boxers from the floor and slid them on. “What’s so important you busted my door in?”

“The ghost we’ve been tracking,” she said.

“What about it?” He looked at me and put out his hand. “Hey, Bradford Smith. How you doing, bro?”

I shook his hand. “I’ve been better.”

“This is Landon Hamilton,” Bianca said.

“No shit? I knew things were getting nasty out there, but to have you paying us a visit means it’s worse than I thought.”

“It is worse,” I said. “I need you to teach me how to see ghosts.”

He laughed. “You can’t teach it, bro. It’s all right here.” He tapped his forehead. “The third eye. Only way you can do it.”

“Then I need a third eye,” I said.

“Hmmm, yeah, about that. I don’t think it works on non-mortals. There are relics, though. Rings and pendants with the third eye on them. Those should work.”

“Fine. I’ll take it.”

He laughed again. “Dude, we don’t have any here. That’s why I had to mark up my noggin.”

Great. Rebecca was out there using mortals to kill people, and there was nothing I could do to stop her. Well, not nothing.

“I need to borrow him,” I said to Bianca. “And I need you to teach me how to do an exorcism.”

“What?” Bradford said. “Borrow? What do I look like, bro? A freaking sheep?”

“You look like my only chance to spot a ghost. Bianca, you just said you’re worried. I’m trying to stop this, but I need your help. What do you say?”

“I have to contact HQ.”

“There’s no time,” I said. “Hearst is getting ready for war. Oh, and if you didn’t know this nugget already, Abaddon is just about ready to break out of his prison.”

“How do you know that?” Bianca asked.

“The complication. I made a deal with Abaddon way back when, and now we’ve got a link between our souls. He can talk to me, and I can talk to him. Not that I want to, because it hurts like a bitch.”

“That sounds like a shit deal,” Bradford said.

“It is. Look, I told you my story. Is the Nicht Creidem in or out?”

“We’re not supposed to work with you,” Bianca said. “Especially after what happened with the Beast. I really should get in touch with the home base.”

I bit my tongue. I wasn’t going to start the argument about Elyse’s father’s plans to use the Box to create his own brand of Armageddon. All it would serve to do would be to drive them away, and right now I needed their help. Or at least, I needed Bradford’s.

He seemed a little more empathetic and free-spirited than Bianca, so I targeted him directly.

“I already said, there’s no time. I’m not asking for a lot. All you have to do is come with me and tell me if you spot her. You don’t have to fight or get involved in any other way, and you could be saving the world.”

Bradford bit his lip and glanced over at Bianca. He wanted to help. His body language made that obvious.

“B,” he said, pleading.

She looked torn. She didn’t want to get in trouble with the elders, and I understood that. They would be hard on her, as in death penalty hard, if things turned out badly.

“Nobody has to know,” Bradford said. “Tell them I’m out on my usual hunt. If anything happens, it’s on me.”

She growled softly. “Fine. Go. Don’t tell any of the others about this. Just forget I ever saw you, Landon.”

“I won’t forget you, but you’ll forget me. I’ll make sure of it.”

“You can do that?”

“How else do you think I stay anonymous when every angel, demon, and Nicht Creidem on the planet wants to keep tabs on me? Thirty seconds after I’m gone, you’ll forget I was ever here. You’ll remember Bradford left, but you’ll just assume it was to go on the hunt. Of course, you won’t remember me telling you this, either.”

“That is one awesome superpower, bro,” Bradford said.

“It comes in handy. It doesn’t seem to work that well in Hell, though.”

He laughed. “What? Are you serious?”

“Completely. Put on some pants, and let’s go.”

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“So, what’s it like, being the diuscrucis?” Bradford asked.

We were in Joey’s cab, on our way back to my place. I was leaning against the window, staring out into the night. I was starting to get the feeling that I should never have come back after I defeated the Beast. My best intentions seemed to be getting me nowhere fast while the war between Heaven and Hell was escalating at an increasing pace.

“It kind of sucks most of the time,” I said. “I thought by changing the rules a bit I could make it easier, and for a while it was. But when I evolved, everything seemed to evolve with me.”

“I don’t get what that means, but I still get you. I thought joining the Nicht Creidem would make things better, but in a lot of ways, they’re worse than ever.”

“What do you mean?”

“I could see them. The angels and the demons. My whole life.”

“You were born Awake?” I had never, ever heard of that before.

“Yeah. Can you imagine that? When I was a kid, people thought I had this incredible imagination.” He changed his voice, making it

high-pitched and scratchy. “Oh, he’s so cute the way he makes up stories. They’re so vivid, too. He should become a screenwriter, or a novelist, or something.” He shook his head. “Yeah, right. When I got older, and by older I mean ten, I saw a vampire feeding. Then I saw a winged something or other tear someone’s insides out. I had a breakdown. PTSD. My mom committed me. The Nicht Creidem got me out.”

“The Nicht Creidem don’t usually visit asylums to recruit inmates,” I said. “Most Awake wind up homeless.”

“I know. They found me, though. They said I was different. Whatever my lineage is, they told me I was immune to Divine power. Not resistant like they are. Completely immune.”

The statement gave me pause. Matthias Zheng had been immune by being completely oblivious to the Divine; not only Sleeping, but Sleeping so strongly that nothing could wake him. Now here was Bradford as his polar opposite.

“Do you mind if I test something?” I asked.

“You want to hit me with your best shot?” he said. “Fire away.”

I threw my power out at him. Not too hard, but hard enough.

“Did you do it yet?” he asked.

I stared at him in astonishment. My power wasn’t like Heaven or Hell’s. It seemed he was immune to everything. “Yeah. Did you feel anything?”

“Nope. I got bit by a vampire once. The teeth couldn’t break my skin. Hey, what do you think of this one? The Nicht Creidem used me as a stud for ten years. I think I have like four hundred kids out there or something. I’m glad they don’t make me pay child support.” He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder like we were old friends.

“Did it work? Breeding you?”

“It worked for me,” he said, still laughing. “I did three at one time once. Dude, I slept so good that night.”

“I mean the kids.”

“Ha-ha. Yeah, I think so. They said some of them were more resistant. None of them are immune. I think more than a few might have had impairments. Like you either get the gift, or you have problems.”

“Do you have any contact with them?”

“No. Don’t ask, don’t tell, you know what I mean, bro?”

I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him what the Nicht Creidem

did to unhealthy offspring. At least not unless I needed leverage.

"So how come you aren't a stud anymore?" I asked. "And, what are you doing in New York? I would think you'd be a higher value somewhere else."

"I went sterile. I spent three months in the same cycle, and not one pregnancy. Don't know how or why, but it is what it is, you know what I mean? The reason I'm in the Big Apple should be pretty obvious."

"I've never seen you around."

"I've never seen you either. Your power doesn't work on me so I would remember. There's lots of people in this city, and while I stand out in a crowd, no offense, but you don't."

"That's the idea."

"I hear you, bro. But yeah, I'm a tracker. I find Divine, and then we call in the hunters to kill them. They never asked me to track you. I don't think they think it's worth the risk unless it's really important. The mucky-mucks don't like you, but I think you're cool. We're fighting the same fight; you know what I mean?"

"It's nice to know at least one of you gets it," I said.

"More than just me. There are others who are rooting for you."

"So, since I can't make you forget me, will you keep quiet to Bianca."

"Ha-ha. I'll tell her the truth if she asks."

Which she wouldn't.

"Thanks, Bradford."

"No problem, dude."

We chatted about normal mortal interests for the rest of the trip. The weather, the Yankees, stuff like that. It was nice to have a guy conversation for a change. I'd spent the last three weeks with three females, and while I was all for gender equality it wasn't quite the same. Obi had been overseas for a while, and I missed it.

"Yeah, I saw that one," Bradford said. "It was - Joey, stop the car!"

Joey slammed on the brakes while Bradford turned his head to look at a homeless woman who was wandering by.

"Shit, Landon. That's her."

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I threw open the door to the cab, sliding out and looking back at the woman. She stopped walking, turning around slowly to face us.

There was no hint of Rebecca in the woman's appearance, but I could sense her in the posture, and in the way she stared at me.

Then she started walking toward us.

Bradford produced a knife, while Joey climbed out of the driver's side.

"Wait here," I said, pushing his knife hand down as I walked past.

I was calmer than I would have expected to be, my lingering anger over Elyse keeping me cold and focused.

I had never expected it to be this easy.

"Landon," she said, her voice the voice of the homeless woman, soft and weathered. "I figured it was only a matter of time before you caught up."

"What do you think you're doing, Rebecca?" I asked, my anger oozing out.

My venom knocked her off-guard. "What do you mean?"

“What do I mean? Do you remember Elyse? You used her body for a while a couple of years ago to do something that wasn’t completely selfish.”

She pursed her lips, but didn’t speak right away.

“Be good. Do you remember that? Do you even know what that means?”

She recovered in a hurry, her posture changing. She stepped toward me. “Don’t you dare judge me, Landon. Don’t even pretend to think that you can. You have no idea.”

“Seriously? Are you kidding me?”

“I saved you from the Beast. I saved this entire miserable world from complete destruction. Damn it, Landon, I saved God. Did that get me anywhere? No.”

“Bullshit. It would have gotten you there in time.”

“In time? How much time? We’re immortal. It could take centuries. Sorry, but I’m not spending centuries pulling kittens from trees to get a pass. Not after what I did.”

“So the other alternative is to go back to evil? To kill someone who trusted you?”

“I’m not playing for Lucifer’s team. I took a page from your story. I’m on my own side, working toward my own end.”

“And what end is that?”

“I’m consolidating the power of the demons here on Earth. Once we’re strong enough, I’m going to start the chaos and the killing. Not to end the world. To force Him into submission. To make Him take me. I didn’t want to kill Elyse, but you forced my hand. I tried to keep you out of this, Landon. I wanted to skirt around you, to leave you be. I know my plans mean disrupting the balance, but it would only be temporary.”

I stared at her, dumbfounded. Whatever she had been before, she had gone completely insane.

“You think God is going to negotiate with you? Have you lost your mind? He didn’t do anything to stop the Beast.”

“That’s not true. The Inquisitors helped you. Adam helped you. Do you think they would have if He didn’t want it to happen? He won’t negotiate directly. Someone will come in His name. They’ll listen to reason.”

“Does Hearst know about this plan of yours? Don’t you think he’ll have a small problem with it?”

“Hearst is an idiot. He thinks he’s in control of this operation,

and I'm working for him to restore myself to the head of the Solen family. He's already forgotten how much I hated my father and my lineage."

"And you intend to overthrow him how? You're stuck in the bodies of mortals, and he has Abaddon's power."

She laughed at that comment. "I've got Abaddon's power, too."

That was news to me. It was supposed to be impossible.

"I can see you weren't expecting me to say that. That's right, Landon, I've absorbed some of the demon's power for myself. I'm not limited to mortals anymore. Abaddon's power allows me to break down the mental barriers of the Divine. If the mind is weak enough, I can take it. Trust me when I say that Hearst's mind is weak. I've already been inside of it a couple of times. I know exactly what he thinks of me, and of himself. I know what he thinks of you, too."

"So you're using him the way you used me with the Grail? You haven't changed at all. After everything you went through, you're the same selfish demon you always were. The world isn't your playground. It isn't yours to destroy so that you get what you want."

"You're wrong, Landon. I have changed. I know better now than to expect anything to be given to me. Whatever I want, I have to take. And I will get what I want. I don't want to have to destroy you to do it. I still love you."

I had thought her other statements were crazy. That one blew me away.

"No, you don't," I said.

"I do," she insisted.

"Do you even hear yourself speak?"

"I paid my price. I earned my way. I'm only trying to get what I deserve."

"By killing thousands of people?"

"Millions if I have to. It is worth that much to me. I'll do anything. We'll see how much it's worth to Him to keep me out."

"I can't let you go through with this," I said.

"You can't stop me, Landon. I know you want to, and I know you'll try. It doesn't matter that you retrieved the Fist. It doesn't matter if you take Abaddon, or send him back to Hell. You're too late. The wheels are in motion, and all of your power isn't enough to stop them. That's why I stayed to talk to you. You can't hurt me.

You can't even touch me." Her angry tirade faded, and her vessel's face softened. "Besides, I wanted to see you again with real eyes. I wanted to hear your voice again with real ears. It isn't the same as a spirit."

I stared at her, my own anger a bright ember in my soul. It was mixed with a crushing sadness. A lamentation for what could have been.

Even if I somehow managed to get Abaddon under control, one of us was going to destroy the other. For everything that had happened, I still didn't want it to come to that.

There was no other way.

"What about Rose?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Rose. My friend. She's this tall, brown hair, big chest."

"I saw her at the deli. She ran away. Is she missing? I didn't take her. It may have been Hearst's people."

There was no real reason to believe her, other than the fact that there was no reason for her to lie. That was good enough.

I reached a hand out toward her. She stared at it for a moment before reaching out as well. What did she have to be afraid of? I couldn't hurt her.

"It doesn't have to be this way," I said.

"Yes, it does," she replied.

We both knew that was true.

I took her vessel's hand in mine. "I'm sorry," I said, squeezing it.

"I'm not," she said, squeezing back.

It was a goodbye. We both knew the next time we met, however, it happened; we'd be trying to kill one another.

I wasn't going to wait that long.

Calmly, gently, I reached out toward her, the real her, with my power, using what I had learned in Hell. Immediately, I felt a sense of her at the edge of my energy, a mass of Divine power, unlike anything I had ever experienced.

I asked it to rest. To calm and sleep and give in to the universe. I didn't focus, I didn't force, I didn't push. I did the opposite, letting her power mingle with mine.

It began to change.

Her eyes widened in front of me, and she screamed in agony, wrenching her hand from mine. I stepped forward to grab her, to hold her and keep going until she was done with this existence.

I didn’t get the chance. Her mortal vessel collapsed in a heap, and I didn’t need Bradford to know she had fled it.

“She’s gone,” he said anyway. “What was that all about?”

“She’s not as immune as she thought she was. Come on, we need to get back to my place. This is going to get ugly, fast.”

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We weren't that far from my apartment, and Joey's extra haste got us there inside of ten minutes. Bradford and I exited the cab, and I sent Joey back to tell Bianca to get ready for anything. Now that Rebecca knew that I could affect her existence, she was sure to at least be considering moving up her timetable.

And I still didn't know where Rose was.

We hurried up the steps and into my place. Alyx was standing near the door when we entered, and she threw her arms around me the moment I entered, planting her lips on mine. I returned her affection, giving her a quick hug.

"Landon," Gervais said. "You're back. It is about time."

He was on the couch watching television again. Zifah was sitting next to him, eating popcorn.

"The world is cracking at the seams, and you're eating popcorn?" I asked.

"They don't have this downstairs," Zifah said. "It's delicious." He eyed Bradford. "What? You've never seen a demon before?"

Bradford was staring. My guess was that he hadn't ever seen a

demon before. At least, not one like Zifah.

"Bradford is Nicht Creidem," I said. "He's helping me find Rebecca. Actually, we already found Rebecca. I had a nice chat with her."

"You spoke to her?" Gervais asked. "What did she say?"

"She wants to hold the world hostage so that God will let her into Heaven."

Zifah's laugh was a rocky cackle. "She's out of her mind."

"Unfortunately. She's got Hearst under her thumb though I don't think he knows it yet. She's also absorbed some of Abaddon's power. She can possess Divine. Or at least, she says she can. Anyway, we need to find Rose and hopefully Dante, and then we need to grab Abaddon and stick him in the Fist. If we get a chance to take out Hearst or Rebecca in the meantime, even better. Zifah, have you made any progress?"

"I gave him one of Rose's bras," Alyx said.

I raised my eyebrow at that.

"It was a compromise," she added.

"Everything is ready to go," Zifah said. "We were waiting for you to come back."

"Let's not waste any time. Quick introductions. Bradford, this is Alyx, Gervais, and Zifah. You probably already know they're all demons, but that's how I roll."

Bradford laughed. "Yeah, dude. Not surprised. Nice to meet you all."

"You might not think so once you get to know us," Zifah said.

"Sorry to stare. I haven't seen a demon your size or color before."

"Get used to hearing that one," Gervais said.

"Shut up," Zifah snapped at the fiend. "Forget about it. Landon, everything is up on the rooftop."

We made our way to the window, out to the fire escape, and up to the roof. Zifah had laid out a circle of small stones there, each of them etched with demonic runes. Rose's bra was in the center, with more runes painted onto it in Zifah's blood.

"I hope I get to meet this friend of yours, bro," Bradford said, his eyes on the bra.

"Me too," I replied.

Zifah entered the circle and stood next to the bra. He held his hands out over it and whispered something. I could feel his Divine

power rising out of him and pouring into the clothes. The runes on it began to burn, sending wisps of dark smoke into the night sky.

A few seconds later, he lowered his hands. “It’s ready to go.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“Who do I look like, David Copperfield? This is real warlock poop, not a crap illusion.”

“Toss it over to Alyx,” I said. Zifah picked it up with both hands and threw it to her.

“What does it do?” Bradford asked.

“It’s like a Divining Rod for big boobs,” Zifah said. “It’ll help you find Rose.”

“You? Don’t you mean us?” I asked.

“Nope. I’m staying here. It sounds like it’s going to get dangerous, and I wasn’t done with my popcorn.”

I was tempted to argue with him and try to get him to come along. He would only vanish once things got hairy anyway.

“Suit yourself. Gervais, do you have anything to make yourself useful with? You can’t even change form anymore.”

Gervais glared at me, clearly unhappy with his currently weakened position. It was kind of fun having him around when he was so pathetic.

“Give me a blade, diuscrucis. I still know how to fight.”

“Here, bro,” Bradford said, producing a dagger. “You can take one of mine.” He held it out, handle first.

Gervais walked over and took it, growing angrier as he did. “Thank you,” he said through clenched teeth. Bradford seemed oblivious to it.

“Alyx, are you getting anything?”

She held the bra in her hand and turned in a full circle. After a full rotation, she started turning more slowly, stopping when she was facing roughly south.

“That way,” she said.

“Then that’s the way we’re going,” I replied.

“Good luck,” Zifah said. “If you need me, you know where to find me.”

We headed back to the fire escape, taking it down to the street. Alyx took point, leading us through the city on foot. It was slow going, and she had to pause often to recalibrate our bearings since we couldn’t take a direct path. It would have been easier if any of us could fly.

“Hey, Landon,” Bradford said, coming up next to me.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“You and Alyx. Are you, you know? Together?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Ha. Don’t get the wrong idea. I was just wondering, since she’s a were, you know? What it’s like?”

“Love is love.”

“Nah, bro. I don’t mean that either. I mean, what it’s like.”

He made a face that told me exactly what he was referring to. I could feel myself getting embarrassed.

“That’s private, don’t you think?”

He seemed confused by that. “Oh. I was just curious. I’ve always fantasized about it; you know what I mean? Yeah, I’m supposed to take demons out, not get excited about them, but it’s just so kinky.”

“She can hear you; you know,” I said, hoping it would end the conversation.

It didn’t. “Have you ever been to a comic-con?”

“No, why?”

“So, I went to this convention once. You know there’s people out there that like to dress up as characters.”

“I’ve heard of cosplay.”

“Yeah, bro. It’s something like that, but not quite. Some people like to dress up like animals and have sex with each other.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I’d never heard of it. “Okay.”

“Ha. Seriously, dude. I mean in full suits, you know, kind of like sports mascots, except with little cutouts for-”

“Is there a point to this story?” I asked.

“You know, I’ve never done it or anything, but it’s kind of hot, and when you think about it, it’s like a cheap version of the real thing, right?”

He shifted his head toward Alyx. I noticed Alyx glance back at me, a small smirk on the edge of her lips. She was enjoying the discourse a lot more than I was.

“I liked you better five minutes ago,” I said.

The comment didn’t dissuade him. It tended to be a problem when a person was too comfortable with who they were.

“Oh, come on, Landon. I’m just saying, bro. Maybe it’s messed up, but I never said I was healthy. I did spend time in an institution, you know?”

“You haven’t seen her change yet. It’s not what you think.”

“Then I guess I have something to look forward to.”

He was silent for a few seconds before putting his attention on Gervais. The fiend was walking a few feet behind me, whistling softly and using the dagger to scratch the sides of cars as we passed. He just couldn’t stop himself from being an asshole.

“So, what’s your story?” Bradford asked.

Gervais stopped whistling. There was a long, silent pause. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah, dude.”

“Then ask Landon.” He sneered slightly and went back to whistling.

Bradford shrugged and came back my way. His mouth opened to speak, and I put up my hand.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay. Whatever, bro. Do you mind if I go talk to your girlfriend?”

“It’s not my decision to make,” I said.

He slapped me on the shoulder and approached Alyx. He had just reached her side when she grabbed him by the arm and threw him roughly to the ground.

“Alyx?” I said, confused.

She stood over the Nicht Creidem and shifted, only halfway through the process when the first of the vampires arrived.

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It wasn't immediately clear how Alyx didn't smell them or hear them coming, or why the mortals around us didn't evacuate the area before the fighting began.

One second, we were walking along the sidewalk on our way across the city, and the next we were under full-scale attack.

The first of them hit Alyx hard mid-shift, knocking her back and away before she could get her legs under her. She slammed hard into a car, knocking it over and almost crushing a few pedestrians below it. They screamed at the sudden chaos and began scrambling away.

In that split-second, I wondered what they thought was happening.

A dozen more vampires followed behind the first. They were special ops types dressed in black and armed with swords. They knew who the most dangerous target was, and they headed right for her.

Or at least, they tried to. I threw my power out in front of them, using it as a wall. The bulk of them slammed against it, losing their

momentum and hitting the ground. They were on their feet in seconds, but seconds were all Alyx needed.

She finished her change, reaching out with a monster claw to grab the original assailant. At the same time, Bradford had regained his feet, and he jumped on the back of one of the vamps, digging a blessed knife into its neck. It howled and collapsed under his weight.

"Well, don't just stand there," I said to Gervais, who was stationary beside me. I pushed myself forward, bringing the obsidian spatha to hand, ready to enter the fray.

Then I heard Alyx cry out. I looked over and saw the vampire had bit her hand, and it was turning black and dead as he held onto it. My stomach churned at the sight. I had seen something like it before, the way the skin shriveled and died beneath the bite.

That was Abaddon's power.

I tried to change direction and head her way to help. A sharp hiss to my left forced me to pause, and I ducked and brought my blade up just in time to avoid decapitation. The vampire bared his teeth at me, showing me dark fangs that oozed a black saliva. They had all been imbued with the demon's energy.

"Get off me, bro," I heard Bradford say. His fist bashed into one of the vampires, knocking it back with tattoo-enhanced strength. A second got its teeth onto his arm, and he used it to pull the surprised vampire into his dagger.

I sidestepped a claw-swipe from my opponent, noting the darkened fingernails with moisture at the tips, and then cast out my power at him, throwing him thirty feet and through a window. I turned back to Alyx, who had managed to dislodge the first of the vampires but was coming under attack by four more.

I glanced back at Gervais. He was still standing there, watching everything unfold. Because of course he was.

I charged toward Alyx, at the same time she leaped, getting herself out of the fracas. The four vampires turned to follow, and I hit them with my power, pushing them back and into the opposite wall. They bounced off and charged me, swords flashing under the streetlights.

I dropped into one of Josette's fighting stances, turning to keep them all in view as they organized themselves for the attack.

"All of that power and this is the best you can do?" I said, taunting them.

“Ask the were what the best we can do is,” one of them said.

Ask the were? I glanced back to find Alyx. She had joined Bradford behind me and had pinned one of the vampires to the ground.

Her left arm dangled at her side, still useless. It hadn’t healed.

“Oh no,” I whispered, the anger exploding inside of me.

The vampires used the distraction to charge, and I pulled my power back in, wrapping it around me like a shield. As they reached it, I threw it back out as a wall of spikes, the energy piercing them and throwing them back once more. They grunted in pain that turned to laughter at my rage.

“Rebecca sends her regards,” the same one said right before I cut his head off.

I threw myself toward Alyx even as their bodies collapsed and turned to ash. She and Bradford were holding their own, the Nicht Creidem’s immunity giving him a firm advantage in the fight. As long as he avoided getting skewered, there was nothing the vampires could do to hurt him.

Gervais was still observing. No. He wasn’t. He had disappeared.

I reached Bradford and Alyx, stabbing one of the vampires in the back. A second tried one more time to cut Bradford with its claws, and then it too was taken down by the blessed knife.

And then it was over. There were no more vampires to fight. Only piles of ash. I turned my attention to Alyx, who shifted back to human form. Her arm was still black and dead at her side.

“Landon,” she said, upset at the wound.

I knelt down beside her and reached out for the arm. “Tell me if this hurts.”

She nodded. I had never seen a great were so afraid of anything.

I lightly touched my fingertips to the wound. I immediately felt a wave of pain flow into them, and my fingernails began to turn black. I drew my hand away, more worried than I was before.

This was bad. Very bad.

I held my fingers up in front of my face. Whatever Abaddon’s power had done when mingled with the vampires, it was contagious. I pushed my power into the wound, trying to heal it like I would any other. There was no effect.

“Landon?” Alyx said again, her voice small. She had tears in her eyes. It broke my heart to see her like that.

“Oh shit, bro,” Bradford said.

“It’ll be okay,” I said.

To calm Alyx or me? I closed my eyes, letting my power flow forward and envelope the damage. I didn’t push it, and instead, put my attention on relaxing. I felt a tingle in my fingers, and the wound began to heal.

I opened my eyes. The damage was gone.

“I can fix it,” I said.

She smiled pensively. I reached for her arm again, keeping my hand slightly above the ruined flesh. I could feel the power below it, and I forced myself to calm while I worked to transform the poisonous demonic energy.

I smiled as the wound began to heal, the black skin fading and first turning pink, and then red, and then returning to the color of healthy flesh. It spread from her elbow down to her fingertips, until finally she was whole again. She wiggled her fingers and then dropped down to embrace me.

“Thank you, Master,” she said, forgetting herself in the emotion of the moment. I was so happy that I forgot myself, too, bringing her lips to mine and kissing her intensely.

“Nice, bro,” Bradford said behind us.

I broke off the kiss, stood up, and helped Alyx back to her feet. “I can fix it, but it isn’t easy or fast. If these vampires start infecting other demons like this, or if they infect mortals, it’s going to be an epic disaster.”

“We have to find Abaddon,” Alyx said. “We have to stop them before they can give any more of their number the same abilities.”

“It might already be too late,” I said. “Bradford, did you happen to see where Gervais went?”

“No. Sorry, dude. I was a little busy.”

I scanned the street. I could hear sirens in the distance, drawing closer. They might not know what had occurred, but the damage was still done. Fortunately, we didn’t hurt anybody.

“As soon as things go south, he disappears,” Alyx said. “At least Zifah was honest about his cowardice.”

“Hmph. Cowardice.”

The fiend appeared behind the broken glass of the window I had thrown the vampire through. His face was coated in blood, his hair a mess.

“The things I do for you, diuscrucis.”

For me? I doubted it. “What did you do?”

He reached down and lifted the vampire where I could see him. He was in one piece, which meant he was still alive. His pants were around his ankles, and his genitals were knitting back together as I watched. It was a disgusting display.

"I thought that didn't work on the Divine," I said.

"True. Very true. But then I remembered what you said about Rebecca, and how Abaddon's power allowed her to enter the Divine. So, I figured I would take a shot. He had Abaddon's power, and now I have eaten some of it. It is embarrassing and distasteful, but I do what I must."

The vampire began to come around. Gervais threw him at me with more force than he should have been able. Then the fiend changed shape, into an exact replica of the demon.

"It appears to work quite well. Surprisingly so. Perhaps no demon can wield the sheer volume of power Abaddon has except for Abaddon, but in smaller bites?" He laughed at his stupid pun. "It is effective."

"Wow," I heard Bradford say behind me.

That wasn't the word I would use. A Gervais who could feed on demons and take their form and their power?

Things were getting worse by the minute.

I lifted the original vampire up with my power, bringing the obsidian spatha to his neck. His eyes rolled open slowly, and he looked at me with bleary eyes.

"Where is Rose?" I asked.

"He doesn't know," Gervais said. "Or I should say, I don't know, which means the same thing."

If Rebecca had sent them, it meant that there was, at least, one thing she hadn't lied about.

"You haven't seen her, have you, Bradford?" I asked.

"Who? The ghost? No. Sorry, bro."

I pushed the spatha against the vampire's neck, threatening to break the skin. "Do you have anything useful that you do know?"

"He doesn't know anything useful, Landon," Gervais said. "Kill him and let us be done with it."

I was hesitant to do anything Gervais recommended, and if the vampire hadn't been carrying Abaddon's poison, I might have let him survive. He was no good to me if he didn't know anything.

I pushed the blade through his neck with my power, killing him in an instant. Then I scanned the street for Rose's bra. Alyx had

dropped it near the banged-up car, and I went over and retrieved it. I could feel the tingle of the power the moment I touched it, and the difference in the feeling as I turned. I was pissed about what had happened to Alyx. I was pissed because Gervais had leveled up, and I was pissed because Elyse was dead. I was also sure there was more and would be more to be pissed about soon enough.

I didn't say anything to the others. I just started walking in the direction the enchanted lingerie indicated. Alyx was at my side a moment later, while Bradford and Gervais followed close behind.

"We'll find her," Alyx said. "You'll save her. That's what you do."

"I didn't save Elyse."

She flinched at my pessimism, and then took my hand in hers.

"You'll save her," she repeated.

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“That has to be it,” I said, pointing out over the bay.

The Statue of Liberty was looming in the background, a symbol of freedom for many, a personal symbol of sacrifice for me. It was where my afterlife adventure had started, where I had met Rebecca, and where I had made the original deal with Abaddon. Whatever the reason was, it always seemed to be turning up whenever something major was about to happen.

That didn’t make me feel better.

At least it wasn’t Lady Liberty herself that I was pointing at. Instead, I was looking at a massive container ship sitting to the immediate left of the Grand Dame. Rose’s bra was facing in its direction, and it was tingling my hand hard enough to make it itchy and numb.

“I guess we need a boat,” Bradford said. “It figures. I can’t swim.”

“Do you want to wait here?” I asked. Alyx didn’t look happy either. Weres hated water.

“And miss the action? No way, bro.”

“Do you see any boats around here, diuscrucis?” Gervais asked. “Because I don’t.”

“There’s the ferry coming right now, dude,” Bradford said.

“Do you think they will be kind enough to head over to that ship for us?” Gervais snapped. “Dude?”

Bradford shrugged. “I think they’ll do whatever we want them to, if it comes to it.”

He wasn’t wrong. We could easily commandeer the ferry and drive it over to the ship, and the idea of it was tempting. I had a feeling whoever was on the ship would notice that.

“The sea approach isn’t going to work,” I said.

“There’s a heliport a little bit east of here,” Gervais said. ”I know how to fly a helicopter, though I’m not eager to be removed from the fight.”

I gave him a look.

“What?” he asked.

“When I wanted to take a chopper in China you didn’t volunteer to fly it.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t in the mood. I’m feeling more peppy today.”

It was so Gervais that I dropped the subject entirely. There was no point.

“Fine. We’ll fly over. Unless anyone wants to swim?”

Alyx and Bradford both looked terrified at the thought. It was cute and amusing how she was afraid of water, especially when she would be fine with jumping out of a helicopter and onto a hard surface from a few hundred feet up.

We hurried over to the heliport. There was a single helicopter waiting there, a privately owned, sleek, black thing with a slowly spinning rotor that was ready to jump into action. A pair of men in dark suits waited on either side of it for its passenger to return.

They were both mortal, and they watched us approach with a trained look of cautious disinterest though I could see their hands shifting to a better position to reach the concealed weapons I was certain they were carrying.

“Can we help you with something?” one of them asked. We were surely an interesting bunch to them. Interesting, and barely threatening.

If only they knew.

“Do you do sightseeing tours?” I asked, pointing at the

helicopter.

“Do we look like we do sightseeing tours, jackass?” the man said. It was typical New Yorker.

“Oh. That’s a shame because I really need a ride.”

“Get lost.”

I didn’t want to use my power on them. If I weren't careful, they would wind up Awake, and their lives would be ruined.

Of course, demons had no problem causing stuff like that to happen. Gervais kept walking up to them, a smile on his face.

“He said we need a ride,” Gervais said.

“Just stop right there,” the man replied, drawing his gun.

“Or what? Will you shoot me? Ah, I don’t look threatening do I? One moment.” He had the knife tucked into the back of his pants. He pulled it out and held it toward the men. “There you are. Shoot me, and I’ll kill you.”

“Gervais,” I said. Too late.

Both men shot him, one bullet in the leg each. He fell to his knees without a sound.

“Damn it, Gervais,” I said, moving forward to stop him before he made good on his word.

Two bullets hit my legs as well. I stumbled slightly before pushing my power to them. They had healed before I fell.

Gervais sprang up from his position, knife heading toward the first man’s neck. I threw out my power, snapping the knife out of Gervais’ grip, and then pulling it back into him and knocking him on his ass. The guards were rightfully frightened at this point, and they backed away as I approached.

“Whatever the hell is going on, we don’t want any trouble,” the first said.

“Yeah. You want the chopper? Take it.”

What I wanted was to cut Gervais’ stupid head off. I couldn’t do it without losing our pilot.

“Get in the helicopter,” I said, following behind him. The pilot hadn’t seen or heard the commotion, but he bailed out quickly when Bradford brandished his knife at him.

“Now, let me see,” Gervais said, taking the pilots seat and looking at the dashboard. “It’s been a long time since I flew one of these things. I did a few days in Vietnam flying for the Americans. Have you ever heard of the Mỹ Lai Massacre?”

“That was infantry, bro,” Bradford said.

“Oh, yes, you’re right. Hmm… Have I ever flown a helicopter before?” He chuckled softly, hitting a few switches and getting the rotors going for real. “You should hold on tight, just in case.”

The chopper lurched forward into the sky, made a tight rotation, and started going back to where the two guards and the pilot were standing and watching the proceedings.

“Gervais,” I shouted, knowing he was heading for them on purpose.

“Oh, Landon. You have no sense of humor.”

He twitched the stick, and the helicopter leapt over the frightened men and up into the sky.

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“Go in high on the first pass, so we don’t look suspicious,” I said.

“Don’t tell me how to do this thing, diuscrucis. I wasn’t born yesterday,” Gervais replied.

“Technically-“

“Don’t technically me, either.”

The helicopter kept climbing as we headed out over the bay. I picked up a pair of earphones and put them on, listening to air traffic control as they were apparently trying to contact us.

“I think you should answer them,” I said.

“Perhaps you are right.” He smiled at me. I hated when he made that face. “Go to hell,” he said to air traffic control.

“You’re going to get us shot down,” I said.

“Oh please.”

I shook my head and stared down at the water below, and then at the container ship as we passed over it. It was about half-loaded, with containers of a dozen different colors and lengths stacked one on top of the other. I could see sailors walking the perimeter and moving in a pattern that was hardly random.

“Demons,” Alyx said, putting her face right next to mine. “I can smell them from up here. Weres, mainly. A few vampires.”

“Do they have Abaddon’s power?”

“No. I wouldn’t smell them if they did. It kills their odor.”

“It may be the only thing that can,” Gervais said. “A miracle in itself.”

“We’ll circle and come back lower to get one more look,” I said.

“Uh, Landon?” Bradford shouted from the back of the chopper.

“What is is?” I asked, turning back to look at him. His eyes were down, staying on the ship as we passed by.

“Your ghost lady is down there.”

“On the ship?”

“No. Not yet. Out over the water. I think she may have followed us.”

Had Rebecca followed us? Damn. Not only did that mean she hadn’t known where Rose was, but it may have also meant that she didn’t know where Abaddon was. But how could that be if she had taken some of his power? I considered it for a minute. What if Hearst was trying to make a run for it with Abaddon? What if he had figured out that Rebecca was playing him for a fool?

Just like she had played me. Our meeting was no accident, and by asking her about Rose I had told her what my priorities were, and where I was going. The attack back on the street was a diversion. A misdirection.

“Okay, forget the second pass. Gervais, get us in position to jump.”

“Very well, Landon,” Gervais said. “Try not to break your neck on the way down. I want to be the one to do it.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The chopper swung in a tight circle. As it did, I could see another helicopter incoming. NYPD. Damn Gervais.

“I told you not to be an asshole,” I said, pointing out the company. Mortals may not have noticed the Divine under ordinary circumstances, but there were only a limited number of things they could think about a stolen helicopter.

“I’ll handle it. You jump.”

I had no idea how he was going to handle it. “Bradford, you ready?”

“I’m not immune to gravity, bro,” he said.

“I’ll help you down. Alyx, are you good?”

She smiled, her teeth growing pointed as she did. “Of course, my love.”

I moved past her to the back of the helicopter, leaning over Bradford and throwing the door open.

“Trust me,” I said, wrapping my arm around his shoulders.

He was too frightened to speak. I looked out the open door at the ship approaching in a hurry. I could see that the guards had noticed us now, and were pointing and shouting.

“Ready,” I said for Bradford’s sake. “Get set.” I lifted him slightly from the seat, keeping him low so we would clear the landing pads.

I was just about to shout, “Go,” when I saw something hit one of the guards, and he fell over with steam pouring out of a wound. Then Rose appeared, running out from behind one of the containers to grab the knife she had used to drop the vampire. Dante was close behind her.

What the hell?

“Go, diuscrucis,” Gervais said.

He dipped the side of the helicopter, catching me off-guard and sending Bradford and me both tumbling out. I felt an initial moment of panic and then pushed out with my power, spreading it below us and using it to slow our descent. Bradford was silent and terrified beside me though he began to calm as he saw we weren’t going to splat onto the deck.

The NYPD chopper was growing near, and it hovered a few hundred feet from Gervais, no doubt trying to contact him over the radio. I saw Alyx leap from the helicopter a moment later, changing and growing as she fell.

Then we had reached the container ship. I pushed out my power even harder, using it like a jet engine to stop our fall. We landed fairly gracefully on our feet, and I let Bradford go.

“Oh wow, bro,” he said, breathless. “That was awesome!”

“Good. Now help me with these guards.”

I took the spatha from my pocket while Bradford produced his knife. Four vampires were bearing down on us, guns in hand.

“I’m not immune to bullets, either,” Bradford said.

Divine didn’t carry guns unless they were planning on fighting mortals, the Nicht Creidem, or me. It meant they were expecting me. Or maybe they were a defense against Rebecca?

The vamps opened fire. I threw my power out around us, using it as a shield. Bradford shied away, expecting to be shot. When he

wasn't, he straightened up.

"Dude, I need to bring you everywhere with me," he said.

I dropped the shield, leaping at two of the guards, pushing their weapons aside and making one neat cut that dug into both of their chests. I heard a grunt behind me, and I spun around, ready to fight the other two.

Bradford had them in hand, getting too close for their rifles to be effective and shaking off their clawed attacks. The surprise of his immunity allowed him to stab them both in the neck.

"I saw Rose before we jumped," I said. "She has to be here somewhere."

I scanned the area for Alyx. I hadn't seen her land.

I heard a roar, and a body passed overhead. She was close.

Where were Rose and Dante?

And what were they doing?

Neither one of them looked like a prisoner to me.

"Keep an eye out for Rebecca," I said. I didn't know what her game was, but I was sure it wasn't meant to come out well for me.

"Doing it," Bradford replied.

We made our way along the side of the ship, heading in the direction I had seen Rose. I could hear more growls, roars, and screams echoing in the night, and when I looked up for Gervais, I saw that he had allowed the NYPD to guide his helicopter away. I had a bad feeling about his goals, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

The echo of gunfire pierced the night up ahead. I knew they weren't shooting at Alyx, what would be the point? It meant Rose had to be close. I grabbed Bradford again and pushed off with my power, leaping high into the air and bringing us down on one of the containers. I could see the muzzle flashes down below, deep within the maze of boxes. I didn't see the target.

"Wait here," I said, not waiting for a response before I jumped down on top of the shooter. I stabbed him with the spatha. "Rose," I called, not too loudly.

I waited a few seconds.

"Rose," I said again.

Her face appeared from around the corner. "Landon?" She smiled. "Hey."

"What the hell is going on?" I asked, getting closer to her. She came out into full view, with Dante trailing behind.

“I’m working the case,” she said.

“What?”

“I’ve been following Hearst for the last three days,” she said. “I tracked him and Abaddon back here.”

Dante coughed behind her.

“With a little help.”

“You’ve been tracking Hearst? I thought you were taken.”

“No. It’s a long story, and I can tell you later. Right now, we have our chance to get Abaddon. He’s here. On this boat.”

“Hearst?”

“Him too, but we need to be careful. He’s not the same vampire he used to be.”

I already knew that much.

“Elyse is dead,” I said.

I saw a momentary flash of remorse. “I know. All the more reason for me to help you with this. You promised Hearst you wouldn’t get involved, and he killed Elyse for it. I never made that promise, so I got involved.”

“So did I,” Dante said.

“So you know how to trap him without the Fist of God?” I asked.

“No, signore. I believe there is no other way.”

“I knew you would come looking for me,” Rose said. “I wanted to be wherever Abaddon was when you showed up. His prison is still intact. If we can bring it to the Fist-”

“Is it small enough to carry?”

“I can transport it, Landon,” Dante said. “Through Purgatory, like I did for Rose.”

“You want to carry Abaddon through Purgatory?”

“Only for a split-second, yes.”

“Isn’t that risky?”

“Yes, but we have to do something.”

“Where is the Fist?” Rose asked.

“Central Park,” I replied. “Turtle Pond.”

“I can do it,” Dante said. “Let’s go.”

I heard a thump behind me. I spun around. It was Alyx, back in human form.

“I killed everyone I saw,” she said. “I - Landon!”

Her face twisted in warning. I didn’t know why, and I barely had time to react. I began to turn around again, knowing the threat was

behind me. Except I didn't understand because only Rose and Dante were behind me.

I felt the knife begin to dig into my neck, the force of it too strong to be typical.

Then a grunt and the knife was gone. I finished turning, finding Bradford on top of Rose, his knife to her throat.

"I don't think so, ghost bitch," he said.

Rebecca had taken Rose, and she had been about to stab me in the back. Again.

Rose's eyes fluttered as Bradford began to recite an exorcism. He paused when she fell limp.

"Which way?" I asked, knowing that Rebecca had fled.

"That way," Bradford replied, pointing down.

That had to be where Abaddon was.

"Alyx, stay with Rose. Don't let anything happen to her."

"I should be with you."

"I'll be fine. I need Bradford to spot Rebecca and Dante to move the prison. Please?"

She smiled because I asked. "Yes, my love."

The three of us took off at a run.

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We made our way to the first stairwell we found. There were three piles of ash around it already, clinging wetly to the surface of the ship. We started to descend, feet clattering on the metal rungs.

"How are you able to stay here so long?" I asked Dante.

"I'm not. I have been coming and going the entire time. Rose is a treasure, signore. She may be mortal, but she is tireless. A rare find."

"Yeah, she's pretty great," I said. "Are you okay right now?"

"I am well, Landon. Get me to the prison, and I will bring it to Central Park for you. Then you can meet me there."

"If we make it. Abaddon isn't bound to the prison anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"He can break it open any time. He's been waiting for me."

"Waiting?"

I didn't understand it either, but it was what it was.

We reached the first deck. Bradford had seen Rebecca go below the surface, but he had no idea how far she had travelled. If we needed to search every deck, we would be here forever.

“Do you know which deck?” I asked Dante.

“No, signore. We saw them load the prison onto the ship. It is a rune covered wooden box just big enough to fit a man, with more runed chains wrapping around it. There is a blade mounted inside which sits in Abaddon’s gut and draws out his power, while at the same time keeping him healed. Whoever holds the hilt gains the power.”

“A sword that steals Divine power?” I said.

“Yes. It is an ancient relic, predating the Canaan Blades. I had thought it was long lost to this world.”

“Apparently not. Do you think maybe next time you could tell me about missing relics with that much power beforehand?”

“As I said, it never occurred to me what the artifact was because we all thought it long destroyed.”

“Great. Just great. Well, there’s only one other way I can think of to find him.”

And I hated it.

And I wanted nothing to do with it.

And I did it anyway.

“Abaddon,” I said, internally, closing my eyes and pushing my voice through our bond.

There was no response.

“Abaddon,” I said again, pushing some of my power through.

I felt a wave of confused nausea hit me. The demon still didn’t answer.

“Abaddon,” I said a third time. I pushed harder, sending my energy through the link and into the demon. He wanted me to come so I could set him free? Maybe I couldn’t end him just yet, but this was going to be his best chance.

I felt dizzy once more, and I fell against the side of the corridor. I felt Dante’s hands on my a moment later, but they turned numb against me. I was only halfway within myself, and halfway somewhere else.

Not somewhere else. Someone else. Abaddon. I was there, inside whatever passed as his soul. I could feel him around me. The power radiated like the sun. The only other time I had felt this much was inside the Box.

“Judith,” Abaddon said, his voice soft.

I opened my mouth the reply before realizing he wasn’t speaking to me. I could hear him speak? That didn’t seem right.

“Judith,” I heard again.

His power was all around me, but none of it was coming at me. He was distracted by something, wide-open for me to eavesdrop.

“I told you I would come, Abelard,” I heard a second voice say. It was ethereal. Corporeal.

Rebecca.

“I’m sorry,” Abaddon said. “I didn’t believe you.”

“It is well. I understand.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve told me that a thousand times. I told you, I forgive you. I’m here. I’ve been here, all of this time, waiting for you. A spirit, waiting to be joined to my lost love.”

“I killed you.”

“And by killing me you brought us together for an eternity.”

“I want to end. I want to be done with this existence.”

“No. Please don’t leave me, Abelard. Please. Not now, when I’ve finally found you.”

“But Judith.”

“Please. If you’re truly sorry, you won’t go.”

I could feel his hesitation. Rebecca was baiting him, too, and he was falling right into her trap. How did she know about his lost wife, the one he had killed in a fit of rage?

“Abaddon,” I said again, pushing a little bit harder. “You can’t do this. We had a deal.”

He heard me this time. I felt his power turn on me, overwhelming me and throwing me violently from his soul. I snapped back into mine, the pain of it a thousand lances across my entire being.

“Landon,” he said. He was different than he had been before. He sounded more put together, more intelligent. Like the way he had in the Box. “My apologies, diuscrucis. I have reconsidered our bargain. Ten thousand years aren't long enough for me to make good on the wrongs I have done to my Judith.”

“You’ll destroy the world,” I said.

“If she wishes it, yes. That is of little consequence now. I have long believed my love lost to me. I have long been remorseful and regretted my actions. I have suffered, and in that suffering wished to end. I suffer no more. I care not if humankind suffers in my stead.”

“She isn’t your lost love,” I said. “Her name is Rebecca. She’s a-“

“Do you question me?” Abaddon said, sending some of his power through the link. My entire body turned cold, and my vision began to fade from the sudden shock and pain.

I did question him. She wasn’t Judith. I knew that for a fact. How could I prove it to him?

“Tell me where you are. Let me come to you, and I’ll prove it,” I said.

Abaddon was silent, though his power swirled within me, a maelstrom ready to unleash.

“Abaddon?”

The demon’s voice was cold and calm.

“I have decided, diuscrucis. I absolve you of your promise. Consider our bargain satisfied.”

I didn’t have time to say anything else to him. One moment the bond was there, strong enough to choke me. The next, it was completely gone. The link shattered, leaving me feeling momentarily cold and alone.

It had been bad before.

It was much, much, much worse now.

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“Landon?”

Dante’s voice echoed in my ears. My vision was blurry, but it started to clear as I shook my head.

“Landon, what happened?” he asked.

I opened my mouth to speak.

The boat began to shake.

“Abaddon,” I said. “He’s free.”

“What?” Dante said.

“Damn Rebecca. She convinced him that she is the ghost of his dead wife. Can you believe that?”

The boat shook harder. I heard screams from further below.

“Down. He has to be down,” Bradford said.

“Dante, you don’t need to be here anymore,” I said.

“I can help you.”

I glanced over at him. He couldn’t help me against Abaddon, and he knew it.

“Okay, fine. I’ll return to Rose. We need to get her out of here.”

“Good enough,” I said. I pulled myself to my feet, feeling oddly

empty without the demon's bond weighing on my soul.

The boat shook again, a little harder this time. I wasn't sure why. Abaddon's power didn't work like that. It was something to worry about later. We had to do something to stop Abaddon before he escaped.

The question was, what?

Bradford would be immune to his power. As for me? I was hoping he wouldn't kill me outright. That he would give me a chance to talk. It was a naive hope, but it was all I had.

"Come on," I said, leading the Nicht Creidem back to the stairwell. We ran down the steps, taking two at a time, following the source of the shouting.

Bradford didn't feel it as we drew closer. He was lucky. One step and I was fine. The next, and I felt a cold tingle growing within me, getting worse with every subsequent movement forward. The fear. It was part of Abaddon's power. From a distance, you felt frightened. Closer, you were terrified. Closer still, and midnight tendrils of paralyzing darkness would circle around you, envelop you, and finally wrap you up and take you in, feeding on your fear and your soul until there was nothing left but an empty husk.

It was a lousy way to go.

I fought against it the only way I could think of. I relaxed into it, letting my power sit neutrally on top of me like a blanket, accepting the demon's energy and asking it to change. I could almost feel it washing over me, cold one side, room temperature on the other as it was converted. I wasn't able to stop it all, but it did allow me to continue the descent.

"You okay, bro?" Bradford asked as we grew ever nearer.

I could feel the darkness of him, and I knew we were almost there.

"You don't feel it at all?" I asked.

"Feel what?"

Right now, I would have traded all of my power for that. "We're close. His power is slamming me pretty hard."

"Oh."

"Any sign of Rebecca?"

"Not so far. When she's in spirit form, she can float through walls and all that shit."

"Why did God think ghosts were a good idea? It seems pretty unbalancing to me."

“I don’t think most ghosts turn so evil.”

Rebecca was almost too evil. It was beyond what I had ever expected she would do.

We exited out of the stairwell and into the engine compartment. Massive turbines occupied both sides of the area, vibrating and thrumming while they worked to turn the ship’s propellers. There was a light at the far end, spilling out of an open compartment.

Abaddon was standing in front of it.

I almost collapsed at the sight of him, my efforts to quell his power lost for a moment in the immediate. He wasn’t the well-dressed warrior I had met in the Box. He was the dark and nearly formless demon, the black soul that stretched out in a shifting tide of pure death, reaching for whatever it could kill and eat and destroy.

“How do I kill it?” Bradford asked, holding up his knife.

I laughed at him. “You may be immune to his power. He’s got a thousand years on you. He’ll take that knife and jam it right into your eye.”

Bradford didn’t seem bothered by the comment. “Okay, bro. So what do we do?”

“Do you see Rebecca?”

“Nope.”

Abaddon was stationary, his tendrils whipping around him as though he were in a storm. He looked like he was waiting for something. What?

There was movement at the other end of the engine room, and a second bulkhead door swung open. Abaddon’s form shifted slightly to see what it was, as did Bradford and me.

Randolph Hearst entered the space, followed by half a dozen of his henchmen. It was easy to see that the vampire had drank heavily of Abaddon’s power. His skin was dark as night, while his eyes burned a luminescent white. Wisps of the dark energy swirled around him with every step.

He leaped from the top catwalk down to the floor, landing a dozen feet in front of Abaddon.

“Sheeeeee’s baaaaacckkkkk,” Bradford said, pointing at Hearst.

Abaddon’s tendrils reached for the vampire. Hearst reached into his pocket, withdrawing an unevenly shaped stone.

“What is that?” Bradford asked.

“A Riftstone,” I replied. An escape route. A way to go from here

to any other demonic rift on the planet.

Rebecca had to have known Hearst had the stone, surely to use for his own timely escape. Now she was going to use it to evacuate Abaddon.

I took one long breath, pulling in my power and holding it. “Can you handle the drop?” I asked Bradford.

He nodded. “I got the power, bro.”

I hated timewalking, and I had a feeling this one was going to get me killed. I had to do it, though. The only thing I could imagine was a lifeless world where Rebecca and Abaddon lived in sick bliss. Either that or God on his knees and letting her into Heaven to stop her from destroying everything. Rebecca. In Heaven?

Both of those images sucked.

I pulled time ahead of me and pushed it behind. As I stepped forward, I appeared directly in front of Hearst, reaching out for the Riftstone while still trying to fight against Abaddon’s power. It wasn’t my intention to stay anywhere near the demon. I just wanted the damn rock.

I got my hand on it, too, before the combination of Hearst and Abaddon’s power slowed me down. Rebecca yanked her hand away, and a solid punch to my midriff sent me bouncing off a piston. I fell onto my stomach, coughing up blood.

“Landon,” Rebecca said. “That was a nice move.”

She dropped the Riftstone onto the floor, mouthing the incantation that opened it. Then she started walking toward me.

I tried to pull myself up, slow to recover from the hit. I wanted to heal, but the timewalk had weakened me, and I was struggling to resist Abaddon’s power. I was barely on my knees when Rebecca approached.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way,” she said, holding her hand up, claws extended and dripping with Abaddon’s poison.

For the second time in an hour, Bradford fell from the sky. His feet slammed into Rebecca, knocking her back and away from me as he landing on his rear.

“You,” she said with a hiss, planting her feet and pouncing at him.

“What did you think of that move, bitch?” Bradford asked, catching Rebecca and turning, throwing her hard against the side of an engine. She landed on her feet; teeth bared, her eyes wide in confusion.

Bradford's shirt had a claw-shaped tear straight down the center. There was no blood. No decay. His immunity was obvious.

Could Rebecca take him in a straight-up fight?

Maybe.

Maybe not.

"Abelard, we're leaving," she said, deciding not to try. "Landon, a little parting gift for you. Have fun with Randolph two-point-oh." She smiled and then vacated the premises. I couldn't see her in ghost form, but Bradford could, and his head turned to watch her go.

She and Abaddon entered the Rift and vanished.

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I struggled to get to my feet, my body and mind exhausted from the time walk. I kept my eyes on Hearst, who was regaining his consciousness after Rebecca's possession.

"Landon?" he said, his white eyes locking on me. He looked truly scary in the dim lighting of the engine room.

"Randolph," I replied, putting up my hands. "I don't want to fight you."

Hearst looked past me, toward the compartment where Abaddon had been stored.

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

"Rebecca possessed you."

"Where's Abaddon?"

"Gone. She took him."

"Son of a... I knew I couldn't trust that bitch; that's why I brought Abaddon out here. How the hell did she know where to find me?"

I looked back at Bradford, who shrugged in response.

"She followed me," I said. "I was looking for Rose."

“Rose? Who’s Rose?”

“The girl from the deli,” I said, getting angry.

He thought for a second. “This high, big tits?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes.”

“Dammit. I told Rebecca to get her, too, but she refused.”

“You killed Elyse,” I said. “She was a friend of mine.”

“If you cared that much, you would have kept your part of our agreement.”

I heard a few light taps on the floor behind us. I glanced back to see that Hearst’s goons had joined the party.

“You knew I wasn’t going to just let you run around with Abaddon. I told you I would keep out of whatever you were doing, not that I wouldn’t try to find a way to stop it.”

“Now you sound like a demon.”

I kept one eye forward, and the other on the approaching vampires. Bradford was watching them too, staying close to me.

“Rebecca just ran off with Abaddon,” I said. “What are you going to do about it, Hearst?”

He flashed a dark, toothy smile. “First, I’m going to kill you. Then I’m going to find Rebecca, and I’m going to kill her. Simple.”

I was afraid he was going to say that. I barely rolled away from him as he leaped toward me, landing amidst his henchmen and spinning on his heels. I was tired and weak, and he was super-powered.

It wasn’t going to be pretty.

I couldn’t do this on my own. Not where I was right now. Bradford was immune, but he wouldn’t survive being choked out or having his neck snapped.

“Come on, Landon. You can do better than this.”

He waited for me to get up. He even kept his subordinates back. Bradford was standing in the middle of it, trying to decide what to do.

“I recommend getting out of the way,” I said to him.

He shook his head and pounced on one of the vampires. I took that as my cue to go on the offense, throwing my power out at Hearst. It hit him hard and knocked him back a few steps, but he recovered too fast, hissing and coming at me again. I caught his arm in mine, turning him and pushing him away. He was fast, he was strong, and he didn’t really know how to fight. It was my one hope of winning.

I heard the fracas to the left as Bradford did his own damage, killing one of the vampires before he was tackled by two others. I needed him alive to help me see Rebecca, so I backed away from Hearst, grabbing them by the neck and throwing them away from the Nicht Creidem.

"Damn it, Bradford. Get the hell out of here."

"Dude, you can't fight them all alone."

"We can't fight them together, either," I said.

They were forming up again, and I could tell Hearst had no intent of coming in solo a third time. I pulled my power in, feeding it into my lungs.

"Alllyyyxxx," I shouted, extra loudly. It echoed off the surrounding steel, loud enough that the vampires grabbed at their ears.

I took advantage of the opportunity, taking the stone from my pocket and throwing it at the closest vamp. It changed into the spatha as it flew, embedded itself deep into the demon's neck.

Bradford followed close behind it, grabbing the hilt a moment later and wrenching it free. He put his arm out to deflect a claw, swept his leg to knock the vampire over, and brought the sword down in its belly.

Hearst roared and leaped at me again. I brought my power up ahead of me like a shield, but he was stronger than I was right now and it served only to slow him. I fell away, barely escaping a poisonous claw before he embedded Abaddon's decay inside me.

I scrambled to my feet, barely avoiding his next attack. Had Alyx heard me from all the way down here? I could only hope so.

"I had everything planned out," Hearst said, stalking me. "I was using Rebecca to drum up support down below. You know, they don't take me seriously in Hell. I'm just a blood counter to them. I've always been the second fiddle. The nerd."

He came at me again. I batted his hands away. He caught me with an elbow, and I fell back a dozen feet, landing hard.

"Do you know what it's like to be so close to the power, but never drink it?" he asked. "To watch everyone around you become something more while you're still just you?"

"No," I replied.

The answer incensed him even more. He came at me a fifth time, launching an attack with a speed and fury I couldn't match. Maybe Alyx hadn't heard me, and now I was going to die.

I did everything I could to deflect his attacks until I just couldn't keep up anymore. In a last ditch effort to save myself, I used my power on my shirt, changing its structure and letting his claws bounce off the hardened material. It was a delaying tactic, nothing more.

I continued to backpedal, searching for Bradford behind Hearst. The Nicht Creidem had to get away. He had to get to Dante and Alyx and Rose and tell them what had happened. I knew they wouldn't give up even if I didn't make it. They would find Rebecca and Abaddon.

I finally spotted him. He was on the ground; his knife buried in his chest.

He wasn't moving.

Shit.

My anger flared. Or maybe it was a renewed sense of desperation. I caught Hearst's next blow, holding his wrist tight. He tried to dislodge me with his other hand, and I caught that one, too, my arms folded over one another, gripping him in a tight cross. He struggled against me, his strength immense. I refused to let go. The two remaining vampires were done with Bradford, and they started coming our way, seeing their boss in trouble. I had to do something, quick.

I let Hearst go. He was pulling against me so hard he stumbled backward, bouncing into his cronies and falling to the ground. I clenched my teeth, reaching out with my power, wrapping it around one of the massive engines beside me. Could I move that much weight?

It was do or die, and I didn't want to die.

A horrible groan preceded the block of steel as it shifted its position, lifting into the air and rotating. Hearst bounced to his feet, ready to charge me again. I released the engine and threw my power out, knocking him over and at the same time pushing Bradford well beyond the landing zone.

"Hold this for me, will you?" I said, action-hero style, as gravity regained the humongous turbine, bringing it down on top of the three vampires.

They vanished beneath it, a spreading pool of blood that sizzled and turned to ash the only sign of their passing.

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I wanted to check on Bradford. Instead, I fell to the ground, completely exhausted. A moment later, Dante appeared directly in front of me, his hand on Alyx and Rose's shoulders.

"Landon," Alyx said, running over and kneeling beside me.

"Landon, are you okay?" Rose asked.

"You're late," I said, glaring at Dante. "Really, really late."

"My apologies, Signore. We ran into some trouble on the deck."

I looked at Alyx. "You ran into trouble?"

"More of Hearst's vampires. I had to be careful they didn't touch me."

I nodded. I was happy she was safe.

"What happened down here?" Dante asked.

"Rebecca took Abaddon. She had a Riftstone. I don't know where they went. Hearst was under there."

"You're saying Abaddon is gone?"

"Yeah. He broke the bond. He doesn't want me to destroy him anymore. He thinks Rebecca is his dead wife."

"Why would he think that?" Rose asked.

“Because she told him, she was, and he believed it. Alyx, can you help me up?”

“Of course.”

She put her arm under my shoulder and lifted me easily to my feet. She helped me walk slowly around the engine to where Bradford was resting. I fell to my knees, leaning over him.

“He’s dead,” Alyx said.

Damn. I was afraid of that.

“He thought he was invincible because he was immune to Divine power,” I said, checking him. It wasn’t the knife that had killed him. They had broken his neck, just like I had worried they would.

“Did you say immune?” Dante asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“That isn’t possible, Signore.”

“I tested it out myself. Nothing Divine could hurt him. He didn’t even feel it.”

Dante stared down at the dead man. “Do you know if he had children?”

“He said the Nicht Creidem used him as a stud for a while until he fizzled out. He said some of the kids survived, but most of them didn’t make it. Is there a point?”

Dante looked thoughtful and distant. “Probably not,” he said at last. “It is of little concern right now.”

“He was the only one who could see Rebecca,” I said. “I don’t know how we’ll ever find her now.”

“That should be easy,” Rose said. “Find Abaddon.”

“Yes, but I mean when she tries to run. She’s too dangerous to be having her way with the mortal world.”

I looked at the third-eye on Bradford’s forehead. “Dante, do you know where to find a ring or a necklace or anything that has the third-eye on it?”

“Not offhand. I can consult with Alichino.”

“Yeah. Go and do that. Make sure you write it down. He’s been worried about you, you know.”

“The demon? He simply tolerates me.”

“Maybe that’s how he acts. It isn’t how he feels.”

“I will contact you when I find something. Be safe, all of you.”

Dante disappeared.

“We don’t have time to go on a treasure hunt,” Rose said. “Abaddon is loose, which means it’s only a matter of hours before

the entire world starts falling apart." She glanced back at the engine. "I wish I had gotten to be the one to crush Hearst, after what he did to Elyse."

"I know," I said. "On both counts." I kept staring at the scar on the Nicht Creidem's head. I needed a third-eye to see Rebecca. Dante might find one, but how long would that take?

A macabre thought wormed its way into my head. In other circumstances, I might have ignored it. Desperate times.

"I have an idea," I said. "It's going to be a bit gross."

"What is it?" Alyx asked.

I reached out and pulled the knife from Bradford's chest. I put it against his forehead and began to cut.

"We need an eye," I said. "This is the only one available."

Rose wrinkled her face but didn't say anything. Alyx seemed intrigued.

"I can do a better cut," she said, one of her fingers extending into a claw.

I removed the knife, and she reached down and slowly traced along the skin, cutting around it. When she was done, she lifted the patch of flesh away and held it up to me. The sight made me a little nauseous, and her ease of handling the skin was a lot less than sexy. The next part would be even worse.

"Put it here," I said, tapping my forehead. Alyx did as I asked, positioning the eye against my head.

I used my power to push the flesh tighter against my skull while at the same time pushing my skin over it, fusing Bradford's skin to mine. It took a little doing, but as I worked the graft on, I began to feel a change in sensation coming from the stolen mark. It tingled against me, and when I looked around, I could see wisps of energy floating in the air that hadn't been there before.

"I think it's working," I said.

"Great," Rose replied. "What about Dante?"

"What about him?"

"We could use his help."

"To do what?"

"Stop Abaddon, maybe? What is it with you and him, anyway? He keeps trying to do the right thing, and you treat him like he's nothing but an errand boy."

I felt the anger, but I wasn't going to let it get the best of me. Not with Rose. "It's a long story. The bottom line is that the Beast

was his fault."

"From what you've said, it seems like the Beast was either nobody's fault or everybody's fault."

"How do you figure that?"

"He fooled everyone. So either everyone is culpable because they didn't figure it out, or nobody is because he was just that good at it. Blaming one person who was doing the best they could-"

"Dante did more than that. He was a Servant of the Beast for a while."

Rose paused, but only for a moment. "Which he clearly regrets, no?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you have to keep punishing him? He comes every time you call. He does everything he can to make it up to you. He told me how sorry he is, but that he can't seem to get that through to you."

I stared at her. I knew her well enough to know she wasn't going to back down. She was right, anyway. It was about more than just the Beast. It was Dante who had sent me back here to live this life, and the raw, selfish truth of it was that I hated him for that. Maybe I had saved the world. Maybe I was the only one who could do it. It had been more hurtful than happy. I had suffered more than I had succeeded. Finding things to care about helped, but it only went so far.

Especially when those things wound up suffering, too.

Maybe that was why I had fallen for Alyx so quickly and so easily. Maybe she was the one creature who might suffer less with me than she had before me. Maybe she was the one thing that could share this life and be better for it. She seemed happy in her loyalty to me, happy to live for it, and to die for it.

"It's complicated," I said at last.

She rolled her eyes. "Bullshit, Landon. Let's call off the pity party and optimize our efficiency."

I nodded a little less than enthusiastically. "Fine, but we need to save him until we need him. The fresher he is from Purgatory, the stronger his power."

Rose smiled. "Okay. You're the boss."

I couldn't help but laugh at that.

"Should we get out of here?" Alyx said.

"Not yet," I replied. "I want to check out Abaddon's prison. At

the very least, I want the sword."

I got to my feet, still a bit shaky. Alyx took my arm and helped support me while we crossed back over to the open compartment.

The inside looked as though a bomb had exploded. There were bits of metal and wood everywhere, scattered around the space along with the ash of dead demons. I scanned the debris, looking for the blade Dante had told me about. If it could sap Abaddon's power, I was sure it would come in handy.

"I don't see it," Rose said. "Maybe Abaddon took it with him?"

"He wasn't holding it when he left," I replied.

"It must have been slagged, then."

I pushed some of the splintered wood aside, revealing a hilt with no blade attached.

"I found a piece of it," I said, dismayed.

"Here's another," Alyx said, lifting a shard of metal with angelic scripture on it.

"This might be one," Rose said, finding a third piece.

"Let's collect as much of it as we can find. We might be able to put it back together."

We spent the next ten minutes gathering the shards and collecting them in my jacket. Then we headed back up to the deck. I had no idea where Gervais had gone, or if he were coming back. I expected we would have to find another way off the ship.

I was only half surprised to find the NYPD chopper waiting for us when we arrived topside. I had known Gervais was going to do something I didn't like, and he hadn't disappointed. He was standing in front of the helicopter, and he waved us over when we popped out of the stairwell.

"Landon, you're still alive. Good."

"You didn't have to kill them," I said.

"I know, but it was boring being out here while you were having all the fun. Do you need a ride?" He shifted form, becoming the pilot. "I won't be missed for a few hours at least."

"Just take us back over to the island," I said. "We'll figure things out from there."

"Affirmative," he said, giving me a weak military salute.

He always had to be an asshole.

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“So, what next?” Rose asked.

We were back at my apartment. It had been four hours since Gervais had airlifted us back to Manhattan, and I had needed a little bit of downtime to recharge.

I had escaped to my bedroom and fallen out of everything almost instantly. Alyx was curled up against me when I woke, alert and waiting for me to come around. She greeted me with a kiss that brought me back to life in an instant, and now we were trying to decide on our next play.

“We can’t stop Abaddon until we know where Rebecca took him,” I said.

“Obviously,” Gervais said.

“He also can’t stay hidden for long,” Rose said. “His power will start destroying things whether he likes it or not.”

“Again, obviously.”

“Even if we do find him, he’s more powerful than any of us,” Zifah said. He was sitting on the sofa behind Rose, his eyes shifting down to look at her bosom every few seconds.

“Is this going to be a meeting for statements of the obvious, or will we have some true mental exercise?” Gervais asked.

“What’s your problem?” Rose said.

“Perhaps I don’t want to lose this world to an upstart vampire ghost, eh? You should feel the same way.”

“Gervais is right,” I said. “Even if his motives are self-serving. Let’s look at what we know. First, we know we need to get Abaddon out of action before he either destroys humanity or Rebecca uses him to get into Heaven.”

“I still can’t see how that plan will work,” Rose said.

“It won’t, which is part of the problem. Second, we know the only way to do that is to get him into the Fist of God. So let’s start there. How do we get him into the Fist? Is it as simple as opening the latch and pushing him in?”

“Cain believed it was,” Zifah said. “With the runes he created, and the ring.” He pointed at the ring I had taken, still on my finger. “Get the demon inside, and it will do the rest.”

“Are you sure it will work?” Alyx asked.

“I’m not going back to Hell to ask Cain, so who knows.”

“If we don’t have anything else to go on, let’s assume it does,” I said. “So third, we know we need to get Abaddon and the Fist of God to the same area.”

“Central Park?”

“It doesn’t have to be Central Park, but it would make it easier not to have to carry the armor around.”

“Dante can teleport it,” Rose said.

“Four,” Gervais said, “We need to do something about Rebecca. How do you kill a ghost?”

“I can kill her,” I said. “If I can get close enough to her.”

“Oh?” Gervais said. “This is new. Do you think you will be able to do it when the time comes? Or will you feel sorry for your old flame once more?”

There was no doubt in my mind or my voice. “I’ll do what I have to do. She had her chance to change, and she chose not to.”

“The eye should help you get close,” Rose said.

“It looks disgusting, by the way,” Gervais said. “Though I commend you for the effort. I’m pleased to see I am rubbing off on you.”

I put my hand up to the third-eye, feeling the marks in Bradford’s flesh. It was my flesh now.

“Speaking of close, we also can’t get too close to Abaddon,” Rose said. “His power will destroy us before we can do anything to him.”

“Yeah,” Zifah said. “It has to be an ambush or a trap or something. If he sees it coming, we’ll never get it done.”

We were all silent for a few minutes while we considered our options. The number one problem was that of us all, only I could get near the demon, and even then not for very long and not without devoting a lot of my energy to protecting myself from him. Whatever we did, we would have one shot at getting it right. No rehearsals, no margin for error.

“I have an idea,” Gervais said, breaking the silence.

I raised my eyebrow at him. Any idea of his was bound to be designed to work out in his favor.

“I don’t hear anyone else volunteering,” he said, smiling politely.

I didn’t have a solid plan either. “Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“You said Abaddon thinks Rebecca is his wife?”

“Judith. Yes.”

“We don’t need to do anything to Abaddon. We capture Rebecca and bring her wherever, it doesn’t matter. When he comes to rescue her, we throw him in the Fist.”

I stared at him.

“What?” he asked.

“That’s it?”

“It is a good plan.”

“If all of your plans are like this, I’m not surprised you never actually succeeded in taking over the world.”

He sneered at me. “There is nothing wrong with my plan, diuscrucis. Find Abaddon, catch Rebecca, use her as bait, profit.”

“Finding Abaddon won’t be a problem,” Rose said. “What about catching Rebecca?How do you catch a ghost?”

“Yeah, Gervais,” I said. “How do you catch a ghost?”

“I don’t know. There must be some way. What if you knock out the person she possesses before she can get out?”

“I would think that would force her out,” I said. “I could be wrong.”

“It’s a bad plan,” Zifah said.

“Oh?” Gervais said. “Do you have another suggestion?”

“Not yet. It doesn’t matter. You can’t catch a ghost, case closed.”

I didn’t want the two demons to start arguing again. “Rose, do

you have Dante in your contact list?"

"I have the number he called me from before he showed up here."

"Good enough. Can you dial it?"

"Sure." She pulled out her phone and hit the screen a few times.

"What's this about?" Zifah asked.

"I asked Alichino to do some digging on ghosts. Maybe he can help us settle this."

Rose put the phone on speaker.

"Hello?" Alichino said, his voice scratchy on the other end of the line.

"Allie, it's Rose," she said.

"Hey sweet cakes," Alichino said. "Call for a date?"

"Alichino, it's Landon," I said.

"Oh. Hey, Landon. Thanks for sending Dante back to check in with me. You didn't have to tell him I missed him, though. You made me look like a sap, and I have a reputation."

"No you don't," I said. "I'm calling about ghosts."

"What about them?"

"Did you do the research I asked you about?"

"You asked me to do something?" I heard the sound of shuffling papers. "Oh yeah, here it is. I was trying to figure out why I was Googling for spirits. What do you want to know?"

"How to catch one," I said.

He hiss-laughed at the other end of the line. "Catch one? You planning on renting an old firehouse and buying a hearse?"

"Funny. I'm serious. I need to catch a ghost."

"Shit. Okay. Let me see." He paused, shuffling notes. "Do you have a third-eye?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Really? I wasn't expecting that. Okay." He shuffled some more. "Do you have a metal box?"

"What kind of metal box?"

"Any kind. As long as it's metal and has a lid."

"I can get one."

"Okay. Get some dirt from a church, and line the bottom of the box with it. Get the ghost in the box, close the lid, and sprinkle salt on it."

"Are you screwing with me?" I asked.

"Nope. I got this online. It has to be right."

“Dirt and salt?”

“Okay, maybe it isn’t one hundred percent accurate, but every part of mortal legend has a real origin, usually stemming from the Divine. The point is, I bet it can be done. Get the box and bring it to an angel. I’m sure they would know what to do with it. Ghosts are more Heavenly than demonic.”

“Not this one,” I said. “At least not anymore. Thanks, Allie.”

“Yeah, no problem. Rosie, this has to be worth a date, no?”

Rose laughed. “Maybe.”

Alichino’s voice rose in pitch. “Maybe? Sure. I’ll take what I can get. Laters.”

“Bye Allie,” Rose said.

“Well, there you have it,” Gervais said. “Find an angel and ask them how to catch Rebecca.”

“Before I do, does anyone else have any better idea?” I asked.

It was crickets all around.

“Alyx, would you like to go for a run?”

“With you? Absolutely.”

“Rose, keep an eye online for anything that shouts Abaddon. Gervais, Zifah, watch the news for the same.”

Gervais was already watching the news. He flashed me a thumbs up.

“Be careful, Landon,” Rose said as Alyx and I headed for the door.

“I always am. Except when I’m not.”

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Twenty minutes found us back at the airport. It was an exhilarating ride, a quick dash through the city, some of it traversed on rooftops with Alyx making massive leaps across busy streets and scaling up and down vertical faces. I enjoyed it as much as she did, laughing at the freedom, strength, and power that she put on display.

It ended too quickly, and we found ourselves back inside the terminal, bypassing security and moving toward the food court once again. I knew I could probably find an angel somewhere else, but I would have to go looking. I already knew Jane would be here.

I found her laying on a bench near Gate 21. She was projecting herself as a weary traveler, splayed out on the bench with her luggage behind her head. There was no sign of any other angels, and that worried me.

“Jane,” I said, coming up behind her. I was masking Alyx’s aura, keeping her wrapped and neutralized in my power. There was no point in causing another scene.

She sat up and spun to face me, her hand out to summon a sword. The action told me a lot about her in very little time. For

one, she wasn't even close to new at the angel thing if she were experienced enough to keep her blade remote.

"Who are you?" she asked, eyeing both of us.

She didn't remember our meeting.

"My name is Landon Hamilton," I said.

"The diuscrucis."

"Yes. We met about a week ago. You wouldn't remember."

She stared at us without summoning her sword. "I remember something happening. I was mad at Saul for starting a fight."

"With Alyx here," I said. "She's a Great Were."

I could see the uncontrollable fear flash through Jane's eyes.

"It's okay, she's with me," I said.

"We're mates," Alyx said. "I won't hurt you unless Landon asks me to."

She didn't seem to get much comfort from that.

"What do you want from me?" she asked.

"Abaddon," I said.

"I should have guessed. All of the others have been returned to the Sanctuary to prepare should he begin his assault on the world."

"Good idea. He's escaped from his prison."

"I knew he would. Nothing but the Box could ever have held him for long."

Would the Fist of God hold him permanently? There was only one way to find out.

"It's worse than that. He's working with a ghost. Her name is Rebecca. He thinks she's his dead wife."

"A ghost?" She shook her head. "That can't be. Ghosts work to redeem themselves and earn their place in Heaven."

"Yeah, she tried that. From what I've heard, it didn't go too well."

She didn't look happy about that news. "Dark spirits are a rarity, and very difficult to control. You should understand how and why that potential exists."

"Balance. I know. I came to ask you if you know how to catch her?"

She looked up at my forehead. "You have a third-eye. You can see her. That's usually the hardest part."

"So, she can be caught?" I asked.

"Trapped? Yes, of course, though I've never done it myself."

"In how many years?"

“For me? Three hundred seventy two.” She smiled. “I don’t feel a day over three hundred. I don’t think any of us has ever had need to trap a spirit. They are uncommon enough as it is, and most fulfill their obligation and are brought to Heaven. What does she want with Abaddon? Let me guess, to destroy the world?”

“Actually, no. She wants to blackmail God. A place in Heaven in exchange for humankind.”

“That’s preposterous.”

“I know. It’s still the truth. Will you help me?”

“I’m not supposed to leave the area. We’re on high alert.”

“Just tell me how to catch her, and I’ll do the rest.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Landon. Only an angel can catch a ghost.”

“Is there any dirt or salt involved?”

“Dirt, yes. Salt, no. I really shouldn’t leave.”

“Can’t you call someone else to take your watch for you? Jane, I have a plan to take Abaddon out of play, but that doesn’t happen without getting Rebecca first. If you help me with this, the seraphim won’t need to be on high alert anymore.”

She looked uncertain. “My Lord may not approve of me helping you.”

“I think He’ll be a lot happier with what I’m going to do than what Rebecca wants to do.”

She considered for a few moments more. “Very well. Meet me at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in twenty minutes.”

I felt an immediate lump in my throat. “Saint Patrick’s?”

“Is that a problem?”

It was where I had stashed the Grail. It was where Sarah had slaughtered a dozen innocents to retrieve it. I didn’t have good memories of the place.

It seemed fate was forcing me to relive a past I wanted to forget.

“No. It’s no problem,” I said at last. “Alyx, can we make it in time?”

“Of course, my love.”

“We’ll see you there,” I said. “Remember.”

She nodded resolutely and then vanished in a stream of light. She was going back to Heaven first. To get a replacement? Or was I going to be walking into a trap of a different kind? I never knew for sure with the Divine.

“Thank you,” I said to Alyx. “For everything you’re doing for

me.”

She smiled brightly. “I’m happy to do it.” She paused. “And a lot more.”

I kissed her once, unable to resist. “Soon,” I said, remembering what Bradford had said. It wasn’t like that. It would never be like that. “Let’s finish this.”

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Jane was already at Saint Patrick's when Alyx and I arrived. She was standing out in front of the church, a large, metal box covered in scripture cradled in her arms.

"I had to return to Heaven for this," she said, holding up the box. "There is only the one. Follow me."

She headed up the steps to go into the church. I paused behind her, my mind flashing back to the past. This wasn't the same thing. I looked at Alyx. Nothing was the same.

I started up the steps.

"Landon," Alyx said, remaining behind. "I can't go in there."

"Yes, you can," I said.

"I'm a demon. I can't."

I paused. I had actually forgotten. The cathedral was protected from demons by powerful scripture. It was the reason I had hidden the Grail there, and the reason the Beast had used Sarah to retrieve it.

"I'm sorry," I said, going back to her. "The scripture doesn't know the difference between a truly evil demon, and a lovely one

like you. Remember, you decide who you are and what you do. It isn't predefined for you."

"I'll wait for you here," she said. "At least I know you'll be safe enough in there."

Even if the angels wanted to jump me, I would have to attack them first. They had to know I wouldn't fall for that one.

"If they want to start something, they'll start with you," I said. "Don't let them, no matter what they say."

"I won't."

I kissed her forehead and ran up the steps to catch up to Jane.

"Really, diuscrucis? A demon?"

"Save your judgement for someone who wants it," I said. "She has a good heart."

"Is it her heart you're truly interested in?"

I felt my anger flaring, and I forced it back down. Was that how they were going to try to bait me?

"That's none of your business. I don't answer to you, or to God."

"Everything answers to God. Even Lucifer."

"The Beast didn't."

She rounded on me, her face turning red. "Do not speak of that in here."

I smiled. Who was baiting who?

We walked the length of the cathedral and then exited through a side door, out into a small garden. It was a calm and peaceful place, a rarity in the middle of Manhattan.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"I told you, we do need dirt." She placed the box on the ground and fell to her knees next to it. She used her hands to dislodge some of the grass and place it to the side. Then she began scooping soil from the ground and dropping it into the box. "Consecrated soil. It will hold the spirit that gets too close to it, and give us time to close the lid."

"Did you tell the others what I told you?" I asked.

"About Rebecca? Yes."

"And?"

"It isn't an open and shut case, if that's what you're asking."

"You mean He might submit to her demands?"

"Not God, no. He isn't the only one who decides who enters Heaven."

"Michael?"

“Yes. He may decide to allow it if it means saving humankind.”

“How can he even consider that?”

“With the hope that Heaven can change her when being a spirit couldn’t. It’s called faith, diuscrucis.”

“I know what faith is,” I said. Josette had faith. Sometimes it seemed like she had too much of it. “I still think that’s a bad idea.”

“It’s a good thing it isn’t your decision.”

“And yet you’re still helping me.”

“We would prefer not to have her, of course.”

“Of course.”

Jane finished dumping dirt into the box, covering the bottom of it an inch deep. She put the lid back on and returned to her feet. “We have everything we need except the spirit.”

“That’s it?”

“When we catch her I will say a prayer that will bind her to the soil more strongly.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

“Once the trap is sprung and Abaddon is contained, I will take her to the Sanctuary for reconciliation.”

“What? Reconciliation, as in penance? As in, you get another chance?”

“Yes.”

I opened my mouth, ready to tell her about my plan to destroy Rebecca. I realized it was probably better if she didn’t know about that up front.

“Okay,” I said, choking slightly on the word.

We retreated back through the church to where Alyx was waiting. I wasn’t surprised to find Saul out there with her, leaning against the side of the cathedral and staring at her.

“Really?” I said, turning to Jane.

“A test. Nothing more. Saul, go.”

The second angel turned his head at Jane’s voice, but didn’t leave right away.

“Saul,” she said again, more sternly.

He started walking toward Alyx.

“Saul,” Jane shouted.

Alyx glanced over at me, and then back at the angel. She didn’t change. She just stood there. Saul approached her, getting within a foot of her. It was close enough that she could run him through with her claws before he could blink.

Jane started forward. I put my arm out to stop her. “It’s okay,” I said.

Saul said something to Alyx. I could see the anger skip over her. She turned her entire body, facing away from him. He said something else, moving with her to stay in her face. She folded her hands over her chest and turned again. I knew she wanted to rip his throat out, but she was controlling it.

When he followed a second time, I was done.

“That’s enough,” I said, casting out my power and using it to pull him roughly away from her. He fell onto the sidewalk, attracting the attention of some of the pedestrians.

“That counts as an attack,” Jane said next to me.

“Is that how you want to play it?” I asked. “The two of you against the two of us?”

“No. I want to help you stop Abaddon.”

She descended the stairs, grabbing Saul by the arm and saying something to him. He nodded miserably and went into the cathedral.

“Are you okay?” I asked, reaching Alyx.

“Yes. I’m fine. I’m proud of myself for not giving in to him.”

“I’m proud of you, too. I told you that you’re lovely.”

“I’m impressed,” Jane said, catching up to us. “I didn’t think it was possible.”

“I told you she has a good heart.”

Jane looked Alyx in the eye. “Perhaps you truly do.”

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We made our way back to my place. Alyx ran while Jane took to the skies, gliding along and easily keeping pace with her. We rejoined the angel on the rooftop, and I brought her down the fire escape and in through the window.

"Rose," I said, entering the apartment. "Anything?"

Zifah and Gervais turned their heads away from the television to check out Jane. I could see the fiend shudder at the sight of an angel.

"You should be careful of the company you keep, diuscrucis," he said.

"Are you talking about yourself?" Zifah asked. He hopped onto the back of the sofa and stared at Jane. "I've never seen a real angel before."

Jane turned to face me. "Landon, your house is full of demons."

"You know what I am," I said.

"I'm not a demon," Rose said, standing up and approaching us. She held her hand out to the angel. "Rose. Nice to meet you."

She took her hand. "Jane." She turned back to me again. "I'll

wait outside."

"Hang on a second. Do you have anything?" I asked again.

"The All Blacks are winning 23 to 14," Gervais said.

"Actually, I do," Rose said, glaring at the demon. She led me over to her laptop.

"Landon," Jane said, motioning toward the window.

"Can't you deal with them for two minutes?" I asked. "You won't fall for sharing the same space."

"Yeah, toots," Zifah said. "We don't bite. Unless you want me to, that is."

She sighed but stepped closer to Rose.

"What do you have?" I asked.

She turned the screen so I could see it. "I've been mapping some random police reports that have been coming in. They've been finding corpses in the street that match Abaddon's MO."

"The street? Like he's just wandering around? If he were out there, he'd be leaving hundreds dead, not single bodies."

"Maybe he's able to contain it? Or maybe sucking some of his power away made him a little less deadly? I don't know. He isn't wandering around. The trail leads right to this building."

She tapped a few keys and zoomed out. I groaned.

"You know it?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's the Solen family's penthouse uptown. Rebecca took Abaddon home."

"She's taking this wife thing a little far, don't you think," Gervais said.

"Does Abaddon even have a penis?" Zifah asked.

"She knows I'll track her down," I said. "She doesn't care. It's a message that she isn't afraid of me." Of course, she didn't know that I had found a means to trap her. I bet that would have changed her plans some. It was a point in our favor. "She should be. We can catch her."

"Ah, now I understand why you brought Ms. Goody-two-shoes," Gervais said.

"It was your plan," I said.

"Landon, what about the sword?" Alyx asked. "Maybe Jane knows how to repair it."

"Sword?" Jane said.

"Abaddon's prison," I said. "They were drawing out his power with a sword. It shattered when he escaped, but I kept the pieces."

I retrieved the bits of metal from where we had left them in the kitchen. “Do you think you can do anything with them?” I asked the angel.

She picked up one of the pieces, her eyes growing wide. “Do you know what this is?”

“I already told you, we-”

“Landon, this is Archangel Uriel’s sword. It was thought destroyed during the War in Heaven when Lucifer was cast down.”

“It steals Divine power.”

“Yes. Uriel used it against the fallen angels, taking their power and adding it to his own. It made him nearly invincible. I can’t believe it has been here this entire time.”

“It’s in pieces now.”

“It can be fixed, but not here. Only Uriel himself may be able to repair it.”

I plucked the shard from her hand. “We won’t be letting him do that,” I said. “I don’t need Uriel coming down here to start powering up again. The question is, can we use it against Abaddon?”

“In this state? No. It is worthless. If it were whole, it might be able to steal enough of his energy to make him manageable.”

“It was jabbed into his gut for over a week,” I said. “He still seems pretty strong.”

“Demons wouldn’t be able to draw the power out, only absorb what was absorbed into the blade. It’s the difference between touching the surface of the water and submerging yourself in it.”

“Do you think I would be able to draw it out?” I asked.

“You should.”

“Wouldn’t you have to get close enough to stick him with it first?” Rose asked.

“Yes.”

“We can worry about that after we get him contained,” I said. I handed the pieces of metal back to Alyx, who returned them to the kitchen. “Rebecca knows I know where she is. She’s going to assume I’ll come for her.”

“So how do we catch her if she already knows you’re coming?” Jane asked.

“She’s expecting me. Maybe even Alyx. She won’t be expecting you.” I pointed at Zifah. “Or you.”

“Me?” Zifah said. “I told you, Landon, I don’t want to get

involved."

"That's too damn bad," I said. "There's no point in you being here if here is going to go the way of Hell, and that's what's going to happen if you don't help me."

"Look, you're a nice guy, and your girlfriend is hot, and your other friend is even hotter. I don't care if this Rebecca gets into Heaven. It doesn't concern me."

I wanted to strangle Zifah. "It concerns you because if you don't do it, I'm going to kill you."

"Really, Landon?" Zifah said. "You're resorting to-"

He started choking as I wrapped my power around his scrawny neck. "I don't like threats, which should tell you how important this is to me. Let's say God lets Rebecca into Heaven. Guess what? Abaddon is still here on Earth."

I let him go. He rubbed at his neck dramatically.

"All I need you to do is distract Rebecca and give Jane a chance to swoop in and get her into the trap. You said you were a master sneak."

"Well, of course, I am."

"Then will you do it?"

He growled softly for a few seconds. "Fine. I'll do it. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"I want a steady supply of popcorn."

Demons. "Okay."

"What about me, diuscrucis," Gervais said. "I don't seem to fit into your plans."

"You'll be waiting back in Central Park. We'll bring Rebecca there, and when Abaddon comes, you'll help me get him in the Fist."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, this was your plan, remember? I trust you'll think of something."

"We can call on Dante, too," Rose said.

"I plan on it. It's going to take all of us to get this done. Are you with me?"

I didn't get much of a response from the assembly of angel, demons, mortal, and other.

"I said, are you with me?"

"Yes," they said, catching on.

“Pathetic. Are you with me?” I shouted.
“Yes,” they shouted back.
“Good. Then let’s save the world.”
Yeah, it was hokey. But what was wrong with that?

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Alyx and I were standing across the street from Rebecca's penthouse three hours later. It had taken a bit of time to fine tune the details of our plan and to get it organized. Rose had called on Dante and filled him in, and everything was supposedly in place. The fact that I was relying on not one, but two demons made me nervous. Very nervous. Especially since one of those demons was Gervais.

Luckily, Rebecca was keeping Abaddon to herself. For the moment at least. I could feel the demon's power, even from the distance, so I knew he was up there. I wondered what they were doing? Playing house, as Zifah had suggested? Who was Rebecca possessing to do it, and how could they survive anything like that?

They were lewd thoughts for another time. Like never.

"How is he not killing everyone in that building?" Alyx asked.

I kept staring at the penthouse. I could see there was a light on up there. "I don't know. Maybe he's learned to control it better? Or maybe Rebecca told him not to kill anyone." I turned my wrist to check the time. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be."

She looked amazing in a red dress that hugged her athletic form. It flowed to the floor, with slits along the sides to give her legs some clearance to move. I was wearing a tuxedo, looking good in it, if I did say so myself. The charade wasn't for anyone, but the vampires I knew would be guarding the lobby. We had to make it past them and into the elevator without making a scene and giving ourselves away. I could hide Alyx's aura as long as she was close enough to me, giving us the appearance of plain, ordinary, wealthy mortals. The kind that might live in the building below the penthouse. I could hide any aura that was close enough.

"I have to say, this is the best ride I've ever gotten," Zifah said.

He was the reason for the long dress. He had his arms wrapped around Alyx's leg, clinging to the inside of her thigh where he wouldn't be seen. It had to be a dream come true for the little demon to get that close to Alyx's groin.

"Keep your appendages to yourself," Alyx whispered. "Or I will eat you."

"Okay, okay," Zifah said.

My phone vibrated. I didn't need to check it. "That's the signal."

We made our way across the street. I kept my arm around Alyx's shoulder, holding her close and playing it that we were a little bit drunk and amorous. We paused a few times to share an overly passionate kiss, and it was all I could do to stay focused on the task instead of falling apart at the taste of her.

"Good evening Jeeves," I said, reaching the front of the building. The doorman was a were though none of the mortals around would know it.

He sniffed me quickly, not picking up Alyx's composition through a strategic scent of booze and perfume.

"Good evening, sir," he replied, opening the door for us.

We had cleared the first hurdle.

We strolled into the lobby, continuing our facade of drunken laughter, embraces, and nearly pornographic kissing. There was a part of me that wanted to save and savor it for the bedroom. It was an important part of the mission, and I wasn't one to shy away from doing what needed to be done.

We made our way past two vampire bellhops and another vamp guard who had the black teeth of one who had drank from Abaddon's fountain, reaching the elevator banks by drawing a lot of the right kind of attention. People looked at us out of the corner of

their eyes, embarrassed and curious at the display. They probably thought we were a pair of celebrities the way we were carrying on, left to wonder if the paparazzi had taken a day off, or fallen asleep.

I pushed Alyx against the wall, kissing her while my hand found the button to go up. She growled softly against me, her teeth catching my lip and biting tenderly, her tongue tracing the flesh.

"I'm ready to forget about Abaddon," she whispered in my ear.

I swallowed hard. Maybe this hadn't been the best approach? "Stay focused."

"I'm focused on you."

"I know. Stay focused on the mission."

She giggled softly beneath my kiss. "I love you."

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. There were five other people waiting to go up, but when I turned Alyx into the car and shoved her back against the wall, and she wrapped one of her legs around me, they decided to wait for the next one.

We shifted as soon as the doors were closed, keeping up appearances for the surveillance cameras. I moved her close to the control panel, hitting the button to bring us up to the floor three below Rebecca. It was the best we could do without having access to a private elevator.

We made out all the way up, which seemed like it only took a few seconds. I was sweating beneath the collar of the tux, and another part of me was making itself a little too apparent, much to Alyx's enjoyment.

Finally, the doors parted, and we slipped together out into the hall. As soon as we made it into the corridor, we pretended to trip and fall, winding up splayed out on the rug and fake laughing like a pair of idiots.

That was Zifah's cue to abandon his hiding spot. He departed from beneath the dress, blending in with his surroundings so completely that I could barely make him out in front of the wallpaper.

We were fairly close to Abaddon, and his power was enough to ruin my earlier predicament. It was also enough to disguise Zifah. I stayed on the floor, still laughing while I pushed open the elevator doors just enough for him to climb into the shaft. He would head up to the penthouse while we circled from the outside. It was up to us to provide the distraction that would allow him to sneak in.

"Ready for round two?" I asked.

She kissed me one more time and slowly dragged herself to her feet. “Yes.”

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We made our way down the hallway. There was an apartment at the end that was directly below one of the windows in the southeast corner of Rebecca's penthouse. From what I knew of the layout, it was a full-length window that went directly into the bedroom. It would be thick, bullet-proof, demon-proof, and angel-proof.

It wouldn't be me-proof.

"Do you think anyone is home?" Alyx asked.

We were holding hands, still walking a little crookedly for effect. I had spotted the cameras in the corners, and I knew the viewers had to be Solen goons; vampires or the Turned. We ambled to the end of the corridor and bounced up against the door. I made a motion like I was fumbling for my card, making sure to hover over the security panel and obscure what we were really doing.

I didn't need to do anything with the panel. Instead, I reached out with my power, finding the locking mechanism inside the door and turning it. The door clicked, and I pushed it open.

It turned out; someone was home. I had barely gotten inside, pulled the door closed, and separated myself from Alyx when I

heard the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being primed.

"What the hell are you doing in my apartment?"

We both looked at him at the same time. He was middle-aged, handsome, wearing a pair of silk pajamas. He looked pissed. His television was on, and a can of beer was sitting on an end table.

Did he always keep a shotgun right next to his sofa? What were the odds of walking in on that?

"What?" I said, still playing the drunk.

"You're in my apartment," he said again.

"This is my apartment," I said.

He shook his head. "You lousy drunk. How did you open the door anyway? Did I forget to lock it again? Go on, get out of here."

"I like him," Alyx said to me, running her hand along my chest and playing it sexy.

"Him?" I asked.

"Me?" the man said.

She slid away from me and moved slowly toward the man. He kept his shotgun up but didn't make a move to blast her. It was a good thing for him.

She reached his side, putting a hand on his face. "Do you want to play with us?" she asked.

I wondered if the guy watched porn, and if he did, what he was thinking right about now. If the stakes weren't so high, I would have thought the entire thing was amusing.

"Wha- What do you mean, play with you?" the man asked.

"Come on, Kevin, don't be shy," Alyx said, looking at me. I guess I was Kevin. "Say hello to our new friend."

She smiled mischievously. She may have had a good heart, but she was still a demon, and sometimes it seemed she just couldn't help herself.

I walked over to them. The man was slowly lowering the shotgun, clearly confused. I put my hand on his arm suggestively.

"What do you say?" I asked him in the most seductive voice I could manage. To an onlooker, it was probably hilarious. "If my wife wants you, I want you."

The statement seemed to disgust him. His face wrinkled, and he tried to take a step back. "You perverts. Get away from-"

Alyx hit him in the temple, just hard enough to put him out. We lowered him gently to the floor.

"You're enjoying this a little too much," I said.

“You looked like you were enjoying it, too.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were.”

“You started it.”

“Yes. It worked, didn’t it.”

I couldn’t argue with the results. The occupant was disabled, and we had our path up to the penthouse. “Come on.”

We made our way over to the window. I gazed into it, down to the city below. Then I cast my attention to the top of the opposite building. I could just barely make out Jane perched on the edge of it, watching.

Then I took a step back. Alyx replaced me, her finger growing into a long, sharp claw. She pressed it against and then into the glass, quickly cutting away a piece large enough for us to climb through.

“Hold on tight,” I said, stepping up to the opening.

The wind rushed in from outside, adding atmosphere to the effort. Alyx wrapped her arms around my neck and chest and clung to me while I focused my power, using it to press us against the side of the building and keep us from falling as I climbed out.

I didn’t see it, but the activity should have sent Jane from her current position to the next one, a secondary skyscraper on the western side.

I had just started scaling the glass exterior of the building when the screams began to rise from below.

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I looked down. I had a moment of instinctual panic when I realized how far I was from the ground, before remembering that I couldn't fall to my death. To a lot of pain, yes, but my head would have to be totally crushed to not recover.

I scanned the street. It took me a few seconds to find the source of the screams, though I should have guessed before I looked.

Vampires.

Lots of them.

They were coming out of the building's parking garage, at least a hundred strong. They pounced on the mortals with reckless abandon, grabbing them, biting them, dropping them and continuing on.

Rebecca was making her move.

We were out of time.

"She's starting the attack," I said. "We need to get up there before she comes down with Abaddon. Forget the original plan, we have to distract her."

She wouldn't put the demon on the streets right away. She

couldn't without killing her own. They would clear the area, and then he would descend as backup. The angels would confront him, and they would die unless they submitted to her demands. And some of them would die. Michael wouldn't agree to let her in without trying to stop her first, but I knew Heaven had nothing that could handle the demon. Not without Avriel and his Box.

"Your turn," I said to Alyx.

She kissed me on the cheek, her face growing and elongating as she did. She released herself from my back, planting her claws on the building and climbing it easily. I scaled the wall below her, a little slower in my ascent. She reached the penthouse window in seconds, drawing back her arm and slamming a massive fist into the heavy glass. It didn't shatter the first time, or the second, or the third. She was reaching back for a fourth punch when a dark tendril began to ooze through the cracks she was making.

"Alyx, watch out," I shouted, feeling the urgency. I planted my feet against the building, pushing off with my toes, using my power to send me springing up to her. I got a grip on her arm with one hand, reaching out to the tendrils with my other.

The fear and pain nearly overwhelmed me before I was able to calm myself enough to reverse it. The tendril evaporated against my skin, dissipated by my passive will.

"Swing me," I said.

Alyx grunted, pulling me back and swinging me forward, toward the window. I could see the dark tendrils of Abaddon's energy filling the bedroom. He wasn't there, watching us, but he knew we were coming. So did Rebecca.

Good.

The window came in fast, cracks spreading across the entire pane. I threw my power out ahead of me, pushing against it with more force than even Alyx could manage. It exploded in a spray of shrapnel that peppered the king sized bed with the rumpled sheets and dead, naked, female vampire laying in the center. It blasted the large armoire, and the priceless art that hung on the walls.

I landed inside, right in the middle of the darkness.

"Alyx, stay back," I said.

She wouldn't be able to survive in the mess. I wasn't even sure I could.

The tendrils shifted, coming toward me like a nest of vipers. I felt the overwhelming fear of the demon, his power a gale force

against my own. I had to stay calm. I had to stay within myself and let it come.

The darkness snapped at me, leading edges biting at my flesh, falling away as it struck it. Cain had no idea what he had done by stringing me up and forcing me to get myself down.

I owed Zifah more than a steady stream of popcorn for helping show me the way.

I waded deeper into the room, even as the darkness eased up around me, pulling back through the doorway I was about to pass out of. Seeing the room clear, I heard Alyx enter behind me, back in human form in order to fit the space more easily. I paused, waiting for her to catch up.

"How?" she asked.

I answered with a smirk and took her hand. We followed behind the retreating blackness, and I knew what we would find when we got to the end of the poison-brick road. I could only hope our entrance had been enough of a distraction to get Zifah inside unnoticed.

We came out into the main living space. The memories came rushing back to me all at once. Merov's party. Rebecca's entrance. The blood fountain and the demon Reyzl. I blinked them away, noticing that the windows had been replaced, as had the furniture with something a little more Rebecca's style. How long had she been living right under my nose and I hadn't known it? Had she been here almost as long as I had?

Had she been watching me the entire time?

"Diuscrucis," Abaddon said. His voice was deep and smooth and wise, more like I had experienced it in the Box. He was standing in the center of the room, his darkness wrapped around him like a cloak, his head shrouded by it. My heart was pounding, the fear of him threatening to make me turn and run with every moment that passed.

Rebecca was next to him. She didn't have a host. Not anymore. The host was back in the bedroom, dead. Before or after? I had no idea. I wouldn't have imagined it was even possible.

"I can see you," I said, her soul forming an ephemeral outline of the demon she used to be. It was a bit rough around the edges, as if it wanted to fall apart at any moment.

"I knew you would come," she said. Her voice was a high-pitched whine in my ears. "I wanted you to come. I wanted you to

see it."

Abaddon's head had turned to look at her. He could see her? Without a third-eye or did he have one somewhere in the blackness of his being?

"You need to stop this. Rebecca, you're killing innocent people."

"Innocent? No one is innocent, Landon. Everyone has done something that they are ashamed of, or that they regret. Why should they be welcomed to His Kingdom, while I suffer as this?"

"They have remorse for what they've done."

"I had remorse once. Where did it get me? Trapped in this world, doing His bidding. Trying so hard to be what He wanted me to be, and being turned away over and over again. Because of who I am? Or because of what I am?"

"You think God is shutting you out because you're a demon?" I asked. "That's ridiculous. He gave you a chance before you ever deserved one. You're the one making a mockery of it. You're the one who doesn't get it."

"But I will get it. With my dear Abelard's help, I will end this nightmare. He promised he would deliver me to Heaven, even if he has to destroy the entire world to do it. I'm holding him back to send a message to the angels. If they refuse? The world will shrivel up and die."

I didn't answer right away. Alyx was tapping her foot on mine. It was one of the signals we had decided on for her to let me know when Zifah had opened the window. She could smell the outside air coming in.

"No," I said. "You're going to watch your Abelard die."

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Of course, there was no way I was going to be able to kill Abaddon that easily. It was a stupid, empty threat, and on its own it would have been laughable.

When I summoned the obsidian spatha and dove at the demon, any thoughts Rebecca had of laughing were put on hold.

I nearly managed to dig the blade into Abaddon's flesh before he could get his own, midnight dark sword up to parry mine. He did it smoothly, hardly concerned about the attack, the rest of his form remaining still, his dark energy staying under control.

That wasn't good enough. He had to fight.

I threw my power out at him, forcing him to unleash his own or fall back. Fear spread away from him like a cape, the darkness swinging out and back toward me like the tide. I held steady against it, letting it wash over me, showing him I could defend myself even at this close range.

"Good," he said, clearly impressed.

I punched him in the face.

He wasn't expecting it. Even I hadn't been expecting to connect.

The force of the blow knocked him over, and I didn't waste any time charging again.

"No," I heard Rebecca scream. The shrillness of it distracted me, and I turned my head to see what was happening.

Jane had landed next to Alyx and had the box laid on the floor, the cover open. She was speaking in Seraph, an earlier form of Latin, her hands glowing as they touched the metal container. I saw Rebecca's spirit, being pulled toward it as though she were trapped in a vacuum cleaner.

"Abelard. Help me."

She sounded desperate. Our plan was working.

Abaddon grunted beneath me, hitting me hard with his power. He had been holding back, at least, a little. He wasn't now. The dark energy blasted through my defenses, sending needles of pain through my entire body and forcing me to shiver in sudden fear. His sword came up at me, and I barely managed to block it in time. He kicked out with a foot, hitting me hard and throwing me backward.

Jane wasn't done yet. I pushed out with my power, flipping myself over and landing on my legs. Abaddon was up, and his tendrils stretched out toward the angel.

Alyx changed, letting out a short roar and tackling the demon.

"Damn it, Alyx, no," I said, a new fear entering my heart. She managed to distract the demon, preventing his darkness from reaching Jane, but she wasn't going to survive his touch for long.

I reached out with my power, throwing her off him with enough force that she blasted through the wall and into the kitchen, a massive clatter of pots and pans following. I charged Abaddon again, replacing her in the melee, leading with my blade.

"I'll kill you," Abaddon said, his voice angry and raw. Before, he had been almost civilized. That time was over. The pure evil was pouring out. "I'll destroy this entire world."

"Not if I can help it," I said. "Jane, can you hurry up?"

I risked a glance to see what she was doing. Rebecca was gone. The lid was on the box. The scripture was glowing. She was rising to her feet, wings spreading to take flight, the trap in her arms.

"No," Abaddon shouted again.

The power of his voice sent a wave of panic through me, and my entire body went numb. Jane reacted the same way, her wings dropping to her sides, her hands slipping on the trap.

I forced myself to stay calm, letting my power dissolve the

demon's. Tendrils of darkness spread out toward Jane once more. Too fast. I couldn't stop them.

Alyx burst from the kitchen in one massive, impossibly quick leap. Her arm was out to her side, and she barreled past me, catching Jane in her massive hand before the evil could reach her. Jane barely reacted to it, the fear still controlling her, and she would have lost the trap if Alyx's hand hadn't closed around it as well.

Then she was beyond us, tucking her head and letting all of her weight and power slam into the window, the same window I had used to escape from Reyzl years before. It crumbled beneath the force, and then she was out of the building, fifty-plus stories above the demonic slaughter below.

She disappeared a moment later, tumbling toward the earth. She was a Great Were. She would survive the fall, even if it hurt when she landed.

"What have you done?" Abbadon cried, getting his hand on my shoulder and throwing me back again.

I hit the wall hard, bouncing back and charging. He was going to the window, and I needed to buy Jane and Alyx some time.

I was almost on him again when something caught my eye from the corner. A dart, thin and long and dark. It buzzed past my ear, vanishing in the darkness of the demon.

Everything stopped.

Abaddon's tendrils dissipated. The dark cloak around him nearly vanished as well, leaving his human form momentarily visible. He was nude and black as night, even his eyes. He was lean and perfectly formed, as though he had been made from a Greek sculpture. He also clearly hadn't been a slouch in fulfilling his husbandly duty with the spirit of his dead wife.

One of Zifah's needles was poking from his neck. He pulled it out, examined it for a moment, and tossed it aside.

"What have you done?" he asked me again. Already, his power was returning, and his cloak began to reform. Zifah's poison had slowed him, nothing more.

It was enough. Jane flew past the window, holding the trap. Abaddon saw it, too.

"I will stop at nothing to get her back, diuscrucis. Nothing. I will destroy everything on this Earth, everything that you love, until you return her to me."

“She isn’t your wife,” I said, trying one more time. “She’s using you to get what she wants.”

“She is my Judith. It does not matter to me if she is the original. I care not for details. Long have I desired a reason to continue, as even you have been unable to end this existence for me. Now it is here, and you seek to take it away? No. I have purpose again, Landon. Do you not understand that? So many years and there is a point to the chaos and death and killing. There is fuel to my fire. You will die. This world will die. She will be free, and He will take her into His Kingdom. He will take me as well. That is the price.”

I wanted to say something. Anything. That last statement put my ability to articulate anything on hold. Abaddon in Heaven? Even Archangel Michael would have to know how impossible that situation would be.

“If you want her back, I’ll give her to you,” I said. “Central Park. One hour. A duel. If you win, she’s yours. If I win, you let me imprison you once more.”

“I can end you now. This world cannot stand up against me.”

“I know you. I know there’s still a shred of honor in you, despite what Lucifer made you into. Central Park. One hour. I’ll be waiting.”

I felt Zifah’s weight on my foot, though the demon was still blending with the surroundings. I reached into my pocket and double-tapped my phone, sending a prepared text.

Abaddon was seething. The tendrils of darkness had returned, and they writhed and twirled around him, snapping forward at me like cobras before retreating and undulating once more. I didn’t know if he would attack, and I wasn’t about to take the chance.

Dante appeared right behind me. His hand landed on my shoulder, and I felt the tug of his power as he pulled me away.

Abaddon would come.

He had to.

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We reappeared back in my apartment. Zifah immediately hopped off my foot, while I ran over to the window to look for Alyx.

She had to be okay. She was a Great Were. She could easily survive a fall like that, assuming she hadn't grabbed the side of the building and climbed down.

I timed it in my head, the distance and her speed. She should have been back.

A soft flow of air, and Jane landed on the fire escape in front of me, still clutching the trap with Rebecca inside.

"I can't believe that worked," she said, smiling at me. It was the first time I had seen her smile.

"Did you see Alyx?" I asked.

"She is fine, Landon. She was delayed killing some of the vampires that were attacking the people."

I felt my heart lurch. "Those vampires had Abaddon's power in them."

"She was careful."

Careful enough? I had to trust that she was. I didn't own her,

and she was trying to do the right thing.

"Are you serious, Landon?" I heard Zifah say behind me. He hopped up on the window sill a moment later. "Challenging Abaddon to a duel? That wasn't part of the plan. He'll beat the living poop out of you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I said. "I don't plan on dueling him. At least not to a finish."

"Oh. Cheat to win? I get it. I'll take one ticket to that main event."

"Zifah, you did well back there. Thank you."

The demon lowered his head. "I figured, what the heck, you know? But did you see that? Even Cain fell to my poison. Not Abaddon. He shook it off like a minor inconvenience."

I had seen it. It didn't make me happy.

"Jane, can you head up and scan the streets for Alyx?" I asked.

"She'll be okay," Jane said.

I was going to push when I saw her turn the corner. She was still in demon form, running hard. I made a quick scan of her for injuries. There were none.

She bunched her hinds and leaped up the fire escape, changing into human form midair and catching the railing as she hit. She smiled as she vaulted over it, leaning into the window to hug me.

"You're okay," she said. "I was worried about you."

"I was worried about you," I replied. "Are you hurt?"

"No. But Landon, something is wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"The mortals. They saw me."

"Some mortals will always Awaken when the Divine are right in front of them."

"No, Landon. Not some of them. All of them. There were police. They stopped their cars and shot at me."

I didn't know what to say. That should never have happened. It had to have something to do with Abaddon's power being siphoned into the vampires who were attacking the people in the streets.

"Did you kill all of the vampires?"

"I think so."

"Then it should be over. The mortals' Awakening, I mean."

"I hope so, for their sake. They were terrified of me."

"I would be too if you weren't on my side."

"Signore," Dante said, joining us at the window. "We don't have

a lot of time."

"Jane, you need to hurry back to Heaven and warn Archangel Michael. Abaddon doesn't just plan to help Rebecca get a pass. He wants to join her there."

Somehow her pale face turned more pale. "What?"

"Exactly. We both know that can't happen. He won't be able to take her without him. He needs to know that."

She nodded, holding out the trap to me. "Very well. Take this."

I collected it in my hands, feeling the soothing warmth of the seraphim power against it. I could see Rebecca's soul inside it with the third-eye, bound to the consecrated soil.

Jane lifted her head toward the sky, vanishing in a beam of light a moment later.

"Dante, Alyx said the mortals were able to see her. All of them. Do you know why that would be?"

He furrowed his brow as if he were concerned, but shook his head. "No. It must be a side effect of Abaddon's power."

"That's what I thought. It seems strange though, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps not. Mortals who are exposed to the demon's power have always died in the past. It may be that one cannot be near it and survive without Awakening."

I got the feeling he wasn't saying everything, but I didn't dwell on it. We had little enough time to prepare for Abaddon to arrive in Central Park.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and called Rose.

"We've got the package. Are you in position?" I asked.

"Ready and waiting," she replied. "Not that I'm enjoying being stuck with Gervais for this. He's already made at least a dozen lewd comments about me and my sister." She made a sound of disgust. "I can't wait to be done with him."

"Just keep an eye on him. You know he can't be trusted."

"I know. I am."

"Great. We'll be there soon."

I hung up the phone at the same time Jane landed back on the fire escape. She didn't look pleased.

"It is up to us, diuscrucis," she said. "Michael will not allow Abaddon into Heaven under any circumstances. If we cannot contain him, he and the other archangels will attend to the matter personally."

That meant they would come down from Heaven and join the

war between good and evil. One of the first things I had learned was that the archangels getting involved on Earth was bad. As in, Armageddon bad.

"Hey Landon, check this poop out," Zifah said.

I spun around. He had turned on the television. The news was showing a live scene of the carnage on the streets outside Rebecca's apartment. There was blood and bodies everywhere, though things seemed to have quieted down. The headline under the image said, "Are Monsters Real?"

"Shit," I said. "This is turning into a real mess."

"Yeah," Zifah agreed. "Look at that." He pointed to the lower left corner of the screen. "It's about to get worse."

I followed his finger. The camera was just barely covering the entrance to the apartment building. A flow of dark tendrils was just beginning to stretch out from it.

"Time to go," I said, feeling a chill at the sight. "He's on his way."

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We took separate routes to Turtle Pond. Jane carried the trap via air, while Alyx roamed the streets, in part to test if any other mortals were affected by Abaddon's presence, and in part to ensure there were no other pockets of vampires attacking the city. Zifah and I went with Dante, making the instant trip from my living room to the balcony of Belvedere Castle, where Rose was waiting for us, a pair of binoculars in hand.

"He's coming," I said to her.

She wasn't startled by our sudden arrival. "I figured he would be."

"Where's Gervais?"

She passed me the binoculars. "Near the pond, over at that tree. He's been doing something to it for the last hour. Scratching some kind of runes into it."

I took the gear and peered through them. I could see the demonic scratches covered the entire trunk of the tree. Whatever it was for, it was intricate, the kind of stuff only a former archfiend like Gervais could manage.

“How do we know those runes aren’t meant to catch you?” she asked.

“We don’t, but if he grabs me and not Abaddon, he’s as good as dead.”

“Don’t get too close to it anyway.”

“I’ll try not to.”

I handed the binoculars back to Rose. Jane came down next to us a moment later.

“Where do you want it?” she asked, holding out the trap.

“I’ll take it,” I said. “Stay back here, out of sight. If I look like I’m in trouble, do something to help me.”

“That is all?”

“Unless you have a better idea.”

She shook her head and took a couple of steps back.

“Signore,” Dante said. “If you are in trouble, I can grab you and get you out, as I did before at the apartment.”

“No. I need to stay close to the trap. I can’t help Gervais with whatever he’s doing if I’m too far away.”

“Understood. Please accept my moral support if that is all I may offer.”

“Thank you, Dante. I know we’ve had our moments, but I’m glad you’re here.”

The poet smiled, even though I wasn’t sure how much of that I meant and I didn’t know if he could tell I was lying somewhat. “Me too, Landon.”

Alyx came bounding through the park less than a minute later, leaping up onto the balcony and returning to human form.

“Did you have any trouble?” I asked.

“No, Ma… My love.” She smiled at her almost slip. “It seems normal where Abaddon’s power has not been. I don’t believe Rebecca had time to order the full assault.”

“Score one for the home team,” I said. “I’m going to check on Gervais and get in position.” I opened my arms, taking Alyx in them. “I love you.”

“I love you, as well,” she said, nuzzling my neck. I closed my eyes, taking in the feel of the contact. “If you die, I will avenge you. Even Abaddon will not be able to stop me.”

“I know.” I backed away from her. Was that a tear in her eye? I hope she had more confidence in me than that.

“Good luck, Landon,” Zifah said.

“Yes, Signore. Good fortune,” Dante said.

“Godspeed, Landon,” Jane said, handing me the trap.

“Thank you all,” I replied, taking it from her. “Be ready for anything.”

Then I pushed, leaping from the balcony and coming down a dozen feet from Gervais and his tree.

“Ah, Landon. You have finally arrived,” the fiend said. “It took you long enough.”

“What is that?” I asked, pointing at the tree.

“My special surprise for Abaddon. Believe it or not, I had prepared it way back when I freed him from Avriel’s Box, just in case he was not as amenable to release as I had been hoping. It will distract him.”

“Distract him how?”

“Does it matter? When you fight him, get him close to the tree. I will activate the runes, and you will use the few seconds you have to retrieve the Fist and put him in it. Yes?”

I reached out with my power, sending it into the pond and finding the Fist of God there. I didn’t trust Gervais. I knew whatever was going to happen; it wasn’t going to be everything I was expecting.

What choice did I have? I couldn’t worry about Abaddon and the fiend.

“Okay.”

“Good. Good. And Landon, should you die, I will mourn you.” He smiled. “I always wanted to be the one to do it, and I don’t want to lose this world.”

“At least, we can agree on that last part,” I said.

“That is Rebecca in there?” Gervais asked, pointing at the trap.

“Yeah, she’s in there.”

He came close and rapped his knuckles against the lid. The scripture burned him, but he didn’t seem to care.

“Serves you right for your failure, Rebecca,” he said. “I hope you never get out of there.”

I didn’t know if she could hear him or not. I pulled the trap away. “Just get in position. He’s on his way.”

“Of course,” Gervais said. He jumped, grabbing the limb of the tree and climbing into the higher branches where he couldn’t be seen.

I walked fifty feet away from the tree, staying close to the edge

of the pond. I put the trap down on the ground, leaning it against a rock so it would be visible from a distance.

Everything was in position.

There was nothing to do but wait.

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We didn't wait long.

I knew he was coming long before he appeared. His anger was in full bloom, and the world around him felt his wrath. The sky darkened, the wind picked up, and the grass began to die beneath my feet, everything around me becoming dead at his proximity. I could only guess at the number of innocents who had fallen to his power as he had traveled from Rebecca's apartment. Thousands who had done nothing more than be in his path.

They were unfortunate casualties. I hated to be callous, but their deaths would hopefully save millions of others.

I glanced over at Gervais' tree. It too had succumbed to Abaddon's power, the trunk turning gray, the leaves wilting and hanging from dark branches. Gervais was hiding up in it, and he managed to remain that way despite the change. The runes remained visible and ready, carved into the bark.

I stood beside the trap, stone in hand, heart pounding an intense rhythm against my chest. The fear was reaching me as well, and I relaxed my power against it, letting it wash away. I could manage it

for now. Would I be able to once he was on top of me?

I looked up to Belvedere Castle. The others had vanished, gaining some distance to escape the power. Was Rose still watching Gervais for me? I hoped so.

He crested a small incline, appearing before me, draped in his cloak, its tendrils spreading out two hundred feet ahead of him, writhing and twirling, snapping like snakes or scorpion tails. His face was hidden behind it, his form ethereal and inhuman. I stayed calm. I had to stay calm.

It was time.

"You came," I said, as the tendrils shrank back toward him and he neared my position.

"You knew I would come."

"I don't want to fight you."

"Because you know you will lose. This was your challenge, diuscrucis. Your decision to make. I did not ask for this."

"You asked me to destroy you. You made me promise."

"And I released you from that promise."

"I haven't released myself."

He chuckled, soft and low and terrifying. "And you have found a way, now that I wish to survive, to join my Judith in Heaven?"

"I have," I lied. Why not? "God will never let you ascend into His Kingdom. Archangel Michael will also not allow it. He would consider Rebecca, but never you. You destroy all that you touch. All that you become close to."

"That is not my fault. Lucifer made me this way."

"Did he make you destroy Judith when she was still alive?"

His silence was all the answer I needed.

"She's here," I said, tapping the trap with my foot. "If you want her, you need to get past me."

"Very well. Let us do battle with honor."

A sword sprouted from his hand, a black thing made of pure evil and death.

The obsidian spatha appeared in mine. I crouched into one of Josette's favorite stances, glancing over at the tree again. I only had to get him close.

He bowed to me, so I returned the gesture.

Then he attacked.

He kept this power contained, at first, coming at me only with the sword. He was good, ridiculously good, and we had done this

dance once before. I had lost that time, and within seconds, I knew that if I tried to fight him straight up, I would lose this time as well.

I fell back, barely able to get the spatha in position to deflect a flurry of thrusts and jabs and cuts. I managed to turn my back to the tree, keeping my feet going and doing everything I could to avoid being hit.

"You were better last time," he said, his sword arcing over and nearly cutting through my neck. I barely bent myself to avoid it, kicking my leg out toward his knee, only to find it immovable. I pushed off, throwing myself backward to avoid a second attack, landing on the grass a few feet closer to the tree.

"I don't use the sword much anymore," I said. I was tempted to use my power, to throw him back with it, or pull his legs out from under him. What would be the point? Perhaps he would submit if I stabbed him, or perhaps he would simply release his contained power and batter me to nothing with it.

"It shows."

He caught my blade with his, throwing out his hand and catching me in the chest. The blow knocked the wind out of me and sent me another ten feet back toward the tree. I smiled inwardly. He was helping me, and he didn't know it.

Perfect.

I scrambled back to my feet, charging him before he might notice the runes. He brushed my first three attacks aside without effort, but I managed to catch him in the arm with a fancy move Josette had only used when she was sure it would win the day. He cried out in surprise but didn't slow, and I had left myself wide open. The sword came in at my heart.

I pushed against it with my power, throwing his arm wide and ramming him with my shoulder. He stumbled back a few feet and paused.

"It that how you want to fight, diuscrucis?" he asked. He sounded disappointed in me.

"I would have lost right there."

He chuckled darkly again, his power beginning to swirl around him.

We were ready for round two.

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I had been losing sword against sword. I was completely outmatched when it came to his power versus mine. He hit me with a whirlwind of dark energy, fear and death and terror unlike anything I had experienced before. I fought to deny it, to transform it, to let it wash past and remain unaffected.

It was impossible.

My heart pounded faster than any living mortals could survive. My skin broke out in a cold sweat, and my eyes became blurry with panic. I threw my power out at him, and he swatted it aside with his like it was nothing more than a nuisance.

Round two?

That was a joke.

I had turned the fight into a massacre.

I stumbled backward, heading for the tree, desperate to get away from the onslaught. It wasn't a question of whether or not he would defeat me. The only question was if I could double-cross him before that happened.

Honor?

There was no honor in desperation.

"I like you, diuscrucis, and so I will give you a chance," Abaddon said, hitting me with another wave of power and knocking me to my knees.

I glanced back at the tree, still twenty feet away. Was I close enough? I couldn't be. If I were, Gervais would have done something. Wouldn't he?

"A chance?" I asked, buying time to recover from the blow.

"Surrender. Tell me that I have won, and I will spare your life. I will take Judith, and we will complete our plan without your intervention."

I didn't answer right away. He was giving me a chance to catch my breath. Why not? We both knew I couldn't win. At least not fairly.

"I can't," I said. "Don't you understand? The entire world will burn. Everyone will die. You and Rebecca still won't be in Heaven. I'd rather die trying to stop it, then to watch everything I care for wither to nothing."

"Good," he said. "If you had agreed, I would have labeled you a coward and drained you more slowly."

He stepped toward me again. I bounced back to my feet, crouching low, sword out and up. His tendrils whipped around and shot at me, and I sprang up and forward, a heavy, hard charge right at him.

I avoided the tendrils, knocking his sword aside and getting into his guard. I stabbed down with the spatha, and his hand came up and caught the blade.

I had made it further than I expected. I yanked the sword back, unwilling to lose it, hitting his shoulders with my feet. I pushed off him, making him lose a few steps while I carried myself back. I had seen Josette pull of a similar move when she had fought Ulnyx, though she had managed to stab him, and I had failed in that.

I landed at the base of the tree.

Abaddon recovered from the move, bowed to me with respect to the effort, and started toward me again. His power shrank back into him.

He was ready to finish it.

So was I.

I reached out with my power, finding the Fist once more and pulling it up from the bottom of the pond. Abaddon didn't notice.

He was so focused on me, and all the action was happening at his back. I dropped the armor on the grass behind him, undoing the clasps that held the prison closed.

I heard Gervais' incantation above me. The fiend remained hidden in the slack branches of the tree, but the runes began to glow with hot fire. I did my best to fake surprise until I caught movement over Abaddon's shoulder.

Rose was running my direction at full speed, pointing up into the tree.

My blood turned cold in an instant. If she was coming, it meant Gervais was doing something I wasn't going to like.

And then it happened.

Abaddon came up short, his power exploding out from him, sending dark tendrils writhing past me. "Avriel," he shouted, his voice harsh with rage.

"Diuscrucis," I heard a voice say, and my cold blood froze to ice.

I turned slowly, not quite believing it, but powerless not to.

"Hey there, pardner," the Beast said. His face was twisted into a scowl, and he was reaching for me with one large, electric hand. The other was holding a head.

Charis' head.

I froze.

"Landon," I heard Rose shout.

Then he was on me.

Not the Beast. Gervais.

He landed behind me, grabbing my arm.

"My apologies, Landon," he said, his lips right against my ear. "But I am what I am."

With one quick, precise motion he cut off my right hand.

I wanted to scream in pain, but I didn't. I was still as he bent down and grabbed the hand, pulling the control ring from my finger at the same time he morphed into the vampire he had killed.

He didn't look back. He sprang over Abaddon, who didn't even seem to notice him in his quest to fight the angel he thought he saw.

Rose had her dagger out, and she tried to intercept him. It was a brave and stupid thing to do, and he didn't even slow, slashing her across the chest before reaching the Fist. He hefted it easily in one hand, the vampire's strength becoming his own, carrying it away from us.

Rose fell to the ground, the demon's poison leaving her still.

I wanted to scream out in frustration. I wanted to rip the whiny little French asshole's head from his skinny, demonic body.

I didn't understand. What the hell was he doing, anyway? He had the Fist. He had Abaddon. All he had to do was grab the distracted demon and throw him in the armor.

Except he didn't.

He kept going until he reached the trap.

Rebecca? Did he want Rebecca? Why? It didn't make sense.

No. It did make sense. He didn't need Abaddon in the Fist to control him. Not if he had Judith. He would use her to make a deal with the demon, and all would be well in his twisted world.

"Abaddon," I said, fighting to block the Beast's voice from my head. "It's a trap. We were both tricked."

He wasn't responding. Damn it.

I grabbed the spatha from the ground with my remaining hand, ignoring the blood and pain from the empty stump. I could regrow it later. I had other business right now.

"Abaddon," I shouted again, skipping in and grabbing him by the neck. He noticed that, and his attention shifted to me. "We've been had. Turn around."

I let him go, and he spun to see Gervais drop the Fist of God next to the trap. He picked up the trap, his hands sizzling from the scripture as he did, and brought it close to the armor.

Time. There was no time. Abandon's power lashed out toward Gervais, but he had gone too far, and as soon as Rebecca was trapped he would stop Abaddon's attack. He would turn the demon on me, and he would win. Maybe not right away, but he would find a way.

I clenched my jaw in frustration. There were no more choices. No more options. I had given Gervais a little bit of leash because I needed his help. Should I be surprised he had bitten me? I had to salvage what I could of the mess.

"I'm sorry," I said to Abaddon, as I plunged the spatha into his back, continuing to push it through as my hand sank into his flesh. I could sense the core of his soul with the third-eye, and I dissolved the sword, moving my hand up to it and wrapping my fingers around it.

He tried to spin again, but I held on fast. I felt the white-hot fury of his evil in my grip, and I made myself calm around it. "Rest," I

said, willing the power to transform, to change, to balance. “Rest.”

Abaddon screamed. The sound of it echoed across the park, so powerfully sad that even Gervais paused in what he was doing at the sound of it.

I had never considered that I could do this before Gervais had forced my hand. But why not? Rebecca was a spirit, a free soul, and I could destroy her in the same way. I could destroy any soul like this if that were my will.

The power began to fade away from him, dissipating and sinking back to Hell. Within seconds the cloak and tendrils were gone. A few more and his black face became human again. I remembered it from our meeting in the Box.

“Diuscrucis,” he said, his eyes old and sad. “Judith.”

“She isn’t Judith,” I said. “She never was.”

“I… I feel…” He paused, tears springing to those eyes, turning more human by the second. “Free.”

He smiled. There was no malice in the smile. No evil intent.

“Thank you, diuscrucis,” he said. “Thank you.”

The last of his soul transformed to my touch, and his body fell away in a burst of light. It rose and dispersed, headed not to Heaven, but to join the rest of the universe.

He would know peace at last.

I wasn’t so lucky.

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I scanned the area for Gervais.

Of course, the bastard was gone. So was the Fist.

The trap lay open and discarded in the grass, the soil spilled across it. Empty.

I turned my attention to Rose. I ran over to where she was laying. I knelt beside her, fighting my own tears.

“Rose,” I said. “Rose.”

She was dead.

I let the tears come then. I crouched over her, lamenting everything the universe had made me. Foremost of all, a failure. I had hoped to help mankind learn to save themselves. I had only managed to get my first and only student killed.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Signore,” Dante said, his voice low.

“I failed her,” I said.

“No, Signore. You saved her. You gave her purpose and pride.”

“The demon that killed her sister killed her, and he got away with the Fist.”

“Yes. It is unfortunate. But you stopped Abaddon, and I know you will stop him.”

“I’m not going to settle for stopping him,” I said, getting back to my feet and facing the poet. “I’m going to end him like I did Abaddon. I have the power, and I know how to do it.”

“That is the Landon I know,” he said, smiling. “Do not worry too much about Rose. She will be with me, and you know I will take care of her.”

“Her soul is in Purgatory?”

“Si, Signore. Unfortunately, she can’t return from there to see you, but I will tell her how sorry you are.”

I shook my head. I could picture what she would say, and how she would say it. “I’m sure she knows.”

Jane and Alyx joined Dante a moment later. Alyx jumped into my arms, holding me tight and kissing my cheek. She was soaking wet.

“He took Rebecca and the Fist,” I said to the angel.

“You stopped Abaddon from reaching Heaven. That is a good day’s work.”

“Did you see where Gervais went?”

“He jumped into the pond,” Alyx said. “That’s why I’m wet. I followed him. He had hidden a rift under there. He took the Fist through it.”

“He put a rift underwater? I didn’t think he had the power to make his own rifts.”

“He doesn’t,” Alyx said.

I closed my eyes, sighing. “Zifah?” I asked.

“Yes.”

They had been quarreling the whole time they were together. It was all one big lie.

I really, really, really hated demons.

Alyx kissed my cheek again.

Okay, I hated most demons.

“We have to find out where they went.”

“I will contact Alichino,” Dante said. “We will work on it. Again.”

“Jane, what do you intend?” I asked.

“I will inform the archangels of the outcome, and of the demon Gervais’ betrayal. Beyond that, I do not know. I suspect we haven’t seen the last of each other, and I would prefer not to forget about

this."

"You won't," I said, making it so. "I may need your help again."

"As long as you are fighting on the side of good, you can call on me anytime."

"Thank you."

Jane bowed to me, her wings spreading behind her as she did. Then she took to the sky and vanished once more.

"I want to get out of here for a while," I said. "Away from New York. There's too much destruction here. Too much chaos. You saw the television. Something is going to change, and we need to be better prepared for when it does."

"I have a place in Mexico," Alyx said. "It looks like junk from the outside, but it can be rather cozy. It also has access to an incredible network of information."

"A good place to track down Gervais from," I said. "And to monitor the situation with the mortals. Are we going to see an escalation in the number of Awake, or will this be an isolated incident? Dante, will you bring us there, and then pick up Alichino and return?"

"Of course, Signore. Tell me the location, and I will make it so."

"I just need to do one more thing first."

I pushed the earth aside, right next to Turtle Pond. Then I lifted Rose's body and placed it in the hole, covering it over. I bowed my head, as did Dante and Alyx. I didn't say anything. There was no need. She had moved on from the vessel. This was tradition and respect, nothing more.

Then I nodded to Dante, and he put his hand on my and Alyx's shoulder. In an instant, we were standing in a junkyard in Mexico, formerly owned by the fiend Espanto.

"I will return," Dante said, vanishing again.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" I asked, taking Alyx's hand.

"Yes. I want to make good memories here, to wash away the bad ones."

"Then let's go home."

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55

It took a few days to get the place back under control. Most of the servants had fled when Cabal arrived to announce the new Mistress, and the remainder had fallen into what I could only describe as a state of confused hopelessness. They were so used to being a slave to the demon that without him, they didn't know what to do with themselves.

We worked to renew that purpose with them, first by getting them fed and clothed, and then by returning them to their old tasks. Their familiarity with Alyx was a help, as was the fact that she had formerly been under Espanto's control as well. They looked up to her like children, and she took to them as a mother would to her young, always treating them with kindness.

It was such a drastic change from anything I had ever seen in a demon. It was a major change from how she had been when I had freed her. Whether it was killing Espanto that had changed her, or if it was seeing what mortals went through at the hands of the Divine, I didn't know. I was proud of the ways she was growing and maturing. I was proud of the free creature she was becoming.

Alichino took over the information network that Espanto had run. He delighted in the capabilities of the fiend's systems, and he swore that he would be able to find Gervais wherever he went with it. I told him that was his only goal. Gervais had double-crossed me for the last time. He had also killed Rose, and while Dante had delivered her message that it was okay, I wasn't going to let that go.

Beyond that, I had a bad feeling that if his power was growing, he was going to make another move on Sarah. I had no question that he still lusted after her power, and now that he could feed on the Divine and capture their abilities, I was worried that he would attempt to do the same to her.

It was a lot to be concerned about.

I forgot about all of it when Alyx and I finally got some time alone together, in a room we had converted into a bedroom far from where Espanto had taken her for his twisted play.

"You promised me," she said, putting her hand on my chest and looking up at me. "As soon as Abaddon was contained. Or destroyed. I've waited four days for you." She smiled. "I don't want to wait anymore."

I looked down into her big eyes. I could feel her desire.

"I don't want to wait anymore either," I said.

And I didn't. I had spent my entire human life as a virgin, and even after becoming Divine and falling in love, there had never been a chance to be with Charis. Even though we had a child in the Box, we had never actually made love.

I was always waiting for the right time. The right person. I thought that was Charis. There had never been a chance. A month ago, I never would have guessed that person would be a demon. Bradford could think what he wanted, but he had a messed up view of intimacy that I was glad I didn't share. I loved Alyx. As furiously loyal as she was to me, I knew I was to her as well. I had seen her true spirit and the goodness of it. It was still tinged with evil, but then, so was I.

It made things a little more interesting. A little more exciting.

I leaned down, picking her up below her rear and lifting her to my height. She wrapped her arms around me, her lips finding mine. I held her while we kissed, releasing every ounce of passion I had for her soul into every motion of my mouth and hands.

She rocked against me, tugging me off balance so that we fell together onto the bed. She laughed, and I laughed too. Her hands

worked to get my shirt off, and I did the same. My body was shivering with excitement and desire. I don't know if I had ever wanted anything more.

"I love you," she said, her hands soft on my bare chest.

"I love you, too," I replied, feeling the shape of her with my palms.

Our lips met again, and I sank so far into the smell and touch and taste of her that I only heard my cell ringing with the barest of consciousness.

"Leave it," she said in a soft growl, nipping my ear.

I tried to ignore the sound of it.

I couldn't.

I knew the tone.

It was Sarah.

"I have to answer this," I said. "I'm so sorry."

She rolled off me, nodding. "I know. It's okay."

I sat up, grabbing my phone from my discarded pants. I hadn't even noticed that Alyx had taken them off. I hit the answer button.

"Sarah?" I said. "What's up?"

"Landon," Obi's voice was a fearful whisper on the other end of the line.

"Obi? What's going on?"

"Landon, we've got a problem, man," he said. "You need to get over here."

"Why? Obi, tell me what's happening."

I could hear his breath on the phone. He was scared. I was sure of it. "Sarah's gone. It doesn't make any sense. She killed Brian and took off with Adam. What happened to him, Landon? What made him fall?"

"Adam?" was all I managed to say. Every part of me had gone numb.

"Just get here, okay?" Obi said.

I looked at Alyx. She could tell I was scared, and she was waiting for me to tell her what we were going to do next.

"Hang in there," I said. "We're on our way."

* * *

Thank you for reading Execution! There's one more book in the series. Don't miss Extinction.

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Book Seven: Extinction

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1

I shuddered a little bit as I came out of the timewalk, taking a few stumbling steps and putting my hand up to the nearest wall for balance. Alyx fell onto her hands and knees, her voice a sick whimper as she leaned down and vomited.

"Geez," Obi said. "I told you to get here, man. I wasn't expecting the Star Trek."

I looked over at him. It had been a while since I'd seen Obi. He looked good. Probably better than I did.

"Sarah," I said. "What happened."

"Landon," Alyx said, recovering more quickly than I was. "I smell gore."

"You don't know the half of it," Obi said. He stepped toward her, putting out his hand. "Obi-Wan Sampson. You are?"

"Alyx," she replied, taking his hand and using it to lift herself up.

"Angel or demon?"

"Demon."

"Yeah. I should have guessed that."

She was wearing a pair of tights and a baggy sweater. It was a lot more conservative than her earlier choices.

“Based on what?” I asked.

“The first thing she did was smell the blood. I’ll get you up to speed this one time because you look like you just crawled back from Hell.”

“That was a few days ago.”

“I believe you. Take a look around if you want, Landon. This place is nothing but death, thanks to Sarah and her new boyfriend.”

“You said Adam was here. Give me the whole story.”

“You want the long version or the summary?”

“Use your judgment.”

“Okay, so you know I’ve been here for the last few months, helping Sarah and Brian deal with the changelings. It’s been pretty rewarding, to tell you the truth. Or at least it was. A few days ago, Sarah comes to me and asks me if I ever have nightmares. I tell her that of course I do. Everyone does. Although, mine have gotten worse since I’ve known you.”

I glared at him.

“Yeah, well, she tells me about how she used to have nightmares, back before you got stuck in the Box. Back before she helped save your life. She tells me about how you used to be able to visit her there, to fight for her in her dreams. Then she tells me the nightmares are returning. She doesn’t know why, but they are, and she doesn’t have you to to help her fight them now.”

“She never told me any of this,” I said.

“She also told me she felt like a burden to you. A needy pyschopath who can’t handle her own crap. She didn’t want to tell you any of that. She said, ‘we’re friends, right?’ And I said ‘Yeah, of course we are.’ And so she described the dreams. Landon, man, they gave me my own set of nightmares.”

“What did she see?”

“This,” he said, motioning to the room ahead of us. I hadn’t paid any attention to it in my dizziness. I did now.

The floor was littered with changelings. They were all dead. They were all covered in blood. Their insides looked to have been torn out by a serrated knife.

Or a pair of serrated wings.

“Only worse than this,” he said. “Much, much worse. She said it was inevitable. That it had been bound to happen the moment

Gervais touched Josette. A union like that was never meant to be. She was an abomination, and she had a role to play."

"That's bullshit," I said.

"That's what I thought, too. Trying to shift the blame and not take responsibility? That isn't the Sarah I know."

"And that's where Adam comes in," I said. "She always had a thing for him."

"Maybe once upon a time when he was a blonde pretty-boy. I got a peek at him, Landon. I don't know what you did, but he's lost it. His chest is covered in scars, and they look self-inflicted. His eyes are deep red. Everything about him oozes evil."

"Hate is the root of real evil," I said. "He hates me for killing his archangel girlfriend."

"You killed an archangel?"

I could feel the judgement from him. "They were creating a weapon that would turn the balance. I didn't have a choice. God didn't agree with what they were doing either. That's why he fell. Of course, Adam blames me for that, too."

Obi stared at me, trying to accept my reasoning. He shook his head. "Whatever, man. It isn't about that right now. The point is, he isn't just a fallen angel. He's a certifiable monster, and somehow he managed to get Sarah under his thumb."

"Is it a coincidence that you survived when nobody else did?" I asked.

The comment perked Alyx up, and she moved a little closer to Obi.

"I don't know, man. Sarah had me dead to rights. She could have killed me. I was coming up from the gym downstairs when I came on her and Adam doing their thing with the changelings. He pointed at me, she came over and grabbed me. We looked at one another. She didn't seem scared or remorseful for what she was doing, but when she stabbed me with those wings of hers she didn't go very deep. Just enough to ruin my shirt. Then she tossed me aside like a bag of garbage."

"So she let you live?"

"Pretty much."

"The last time, she was at war with herself. The good side against the bad side. I helped the good side win. In that sense, she was right. She'll always be a bit of both, like me. The evil side was always going to come back, but I thought she was strong enough to

handle it. I guess not."

"Not when Adam was involved, I guess."

"Any idea where they went, or what their goals are?"

"Armageddon," Obi said. "Not for humans, though. For Divine. She wants to kill them all."

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2

Kill all of the Divine.

I let the idea of it roll around in my head a little bit.

Kill all of the Divine.

My first instinct was that it didn't seem like such a bad idea. The Divine were the reason that humankind was under threat in the first place. It was their war that caught people in the middle, causing mass destruction, the killing of innocents, and feeding a whole lot of strife into the world.

Then the logical side of me caught up. That was a one-sided argument. The Divine weren't bad. Demons were bad. The servants of God fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick. If the Demons weren't around, they would be caretakers for the meek of humanity until the End of Days.

That was the problem there. The End of Days. The Rapture. When God would take up all those who believed in Him and leave the rest of us for demon food. If Heaven were willing to maintain the status quo concerning believers and non-believers, I would happily be out of a job.

But they weren't. I had seen firsthand how their millennia of war had changed the nature of the relationship between Heaven and Earth. The Angels I knew were doing their best to skirt the rules to win; fallout be damned.

Adam was the poster-boy for that.

Look where it had gotten him.

And now Sarah was caught up in the storm. The one human on Earth who might be able to help him achieve such a lofty goal. But she had spared Obi, which meant the evil side of her hadn't won over completely, at least not yet. It meant there was hope that I could stop him, stop her, stop this, before it got completely out of control.

It was a new wrinkle in the war between good and evil. A war I had remade myself to fight and was already worn out on once more. I had been in self-imposed exile for two years after the Beast was destroyed. I stayed out of the affairs of Divine and mortals alike, using the time to lick my wounds and reflect. That reflection had seemed so clear at the time, but now it was muddy and faded.

What had I accomplished since my return? The balance had remained intact while I was gone. Hell, it almost seemed like it had been on autopilot without me.

Now?

Abaddon had been set free, and he had killed hundreds on his march to Central Park, an event the media had portrayed as a terrorist attack using a yet-to-be-identified poison gas. I had killed an archangel, and caused an angel I had once considered an ally to fall. I had taken one student under my wing, and quickly got her killed, and she wasn't the only ally of mine that had wound up dead. I had also been duped by Gervais not once, but twice.

And while nearly all of this was going on, all I had been able to think about was the Great Were standing beside me, of throwing her onto a bed, tearing off her clothes, and giving in to my darkest side.

I had been so close to doing it. I would have done it if Obi hadn't called. Maybe I loved her. Did it matter? Gervais was out there in control of a Fist of God, with Rebecca's spirit trapped inside. Sarah had been falling under the influence, and she had been afraid to talk to me. I was the Diuscrucis, a perfect balance of good and evil. But did I have to be? Did I even want to be?

Ever since I had come back, the war between Heaven and Hell

had only escalated. Ever since I had come back, things had only grown more and more out of control.

Was it coincidence? Maybe. Randolph Hearst was working to get his teeth into Abaddon almost since the day I returned. Satan had been the one to send Gervais back, in part to punish him, and in part to punish me. Where would the former archfiend be without me to play the foil?

The first time we met, Dante told me the universe would always find a way to even the score. Was my presence causing the escalation, or was it holding everything in check? Which came first, the Divine or the Diuscrucis?

I didn't know. I wasn't sure if I would ever know. The only thing I had confidence in was that I had failed Sarah in a big way, and now it was my responsibility to set things right. Whether it was for the sake of the balance, for my own sake, or for Sarah's was about as clear as my reflection.

"Landon, you okay, man?" Obi said, snapping me out of my inner monolog.

"Not really," I replied.

It wasn't just Adam and Sarah I was worried about, though that alone was more than enough. She was stronger than me in a lot of ways, even with the Beast-mode I had taken. If her evil side attacked me unhindered, she would probably win. And, the longer it took me to get to her, the more in control that part of her would become.

On top of that, there was no way in Hell that Gervais wasn't going to try to take advantage of this situation. Adam was strong, but Gervais with the Fist and the help of that traitorous asshole Zifah was a different level entirely. If his worm-tongue managed to convince Sarah to change sides again, it was going to be more than the Divine who were in trouble.

It was going to be everyone, and everything.

I locked eyes with Obi. He knew if I said I wasn't okay that he should probably be worried, and I could see a hint of that in the creases on his forehead. He held my gaze, though, not letting me see him sweat.

"We need to know where they went," I said. "We need to know right now."

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3

Of course, needing something and getting it are never the same thing.

It didn't matter how badly I wanted to know where Adam had taken Sarah; I didn't have the power to locate every Divine on the planet instantly. As far as I knew, nobody did.

I did the only other thing I could do. I sent Alyx to watch television in hopes of catching a report on strange occurrences like terrorist poison gas and put Obi on scouring the Internet for news of the same.

That process worked well enough for most demons, but I had a feeling it wasn't going to be so easy with Adam. He had worked with me. He knew how I operated. If he didn't want me to find him, and I had a feeling he didn't just yet, he would know to stay quiet until he was ready for the confrontation.

My goal was to confront him before that.

"Alichino," I said when the demon picked up.

"Who is this?" he replied.

"Landon," I said. He would have a better memory of me than

most, now that he was living in Espanto's former compound with us.

"Oh. Landon. Yeah, I should have guessed. Wait a minute, why are you calling me? Last I remember you were here. How long ago was that?"

"Since you saw me? About thirty minutes. I'm not there anymore. I'm in France."

He cackled. "The City of Love. Good call, Casanova. Although I don't think Alyx needs you to wine and dine her first."

I clenched my teeth, my earlier thoughts still fresh. I had let my lust get the better of me. I deserved better, and so did Alyx, even if she didn't know it.

"I'm at Sarah's place," I said. "We've got a problem."

"Gervais?"

"No. Adam."

"The angel?"

"The fallen angel."

"Right. What kind of problem."

I described the situation to him. When I finished, he whistled.

"Damn, Landon. I don't know how I'm supposed to help you with this. I'm having enough trouble getting a bead on Gervais and the Fist."

"Drop that for now. Gervais will turn up wherever Sarah is now that her evil side is in charge. I'd bet my life on it. I need to know where Adam is hiding."

"Yeah, sure, I'll do my best."

"Are you writing this down?"

"Yeah, of course. What do I look like to you?"

"You don't have a way to contact Dante, do you?"

"I don't have a red phone or a big red button if that's what you're asking. I can pass a message along, but it could be a day or two before he gets it."

I considered whether or not I wanted to bring him into this. He had advocated killing Sarah all of those years ago. He was going to blame me for whatever happened.

He also knew more about diuscrucis than anyone. I needed him.

"Do it," I said.

"Okie Dokie. Will do." He paused for a moment. "Hey, Landon?"

"What?"

"How bad is this?"

“Humans and Divine are both going to die. I’m sure of that. How many depends on us.”

“That’s not an answer.”

I ended the call. I didn’t answer him because I didn’t have an answer. If I were comparing this to the Beast, this probably wasn’t as bad as that.

Then again, maybe it was worse.

I made my way from the worse scene of carnage up to Sarah’s bedroom. It was her private space, and as a result had avoided the chaos and bloodshed. Alyx was sitting cross-legged on the bed when I entered. I paused for a moment, looking around. The walls were pink, the carpet thick and white. The bed was four-posted wood, elegant and youthful. I felt another twinge of guilt.

The television was on across from Alyx. She didn’t look my way when I came in. Her eyes were glued to the broadcast.

“Do you speak French?” I asked.

“Wi,” she replied. “All of the major human languages. Espanto made me learn them because he didn’t want to.” She made a disgusted face.

“What did you find?”

“Nothing related, I don’t think. Two people were shot near the Arc.”

“Who shot them?”

“They don’t know.”

“Probably a demon, but not the one we’re looking for.”

“Yes.”

I stared at her for a moment, tempted to have a talk with her about what I was feeling right then and there. Looking at her made it harder. She was an addiction, and she wasn’t even trying.

“Have you checked the other outlets?” I asked.

“They’re all reporting on this.”

I expected Adam to lay low. That didn’t mean I liked it.

I felt the other words bubbling up from my chest toward my lips. Did I have to say them now, as if that were more important? If I didn’t say them now, would I be able to say them later?

“Alyx, I want to talk to you about something.”

She looked at me. “You feel guilty about what we almost did.”

I stopped mid-thought. “Yeah. How did you know?”

“I can smell your moods.”

“You can?”

“Yes. You wear your heart on your sleeve, Landon. It doesn’t only display in body language, but in your scent, too.” She smiled.

“I just don’t want to mess things up, and I don’t just mean with you and me. I’m pretty sure I love you. I don’t want to treat you like a plaything, even if you want to play, too. I also don’t want the world to fall apart because I’m too distracted. If I had been more accessible, Sarah might have talked to me.”

“And she might not have.”

“Allie-”

“I understand. I do. I want to be with you, Landon. Part of that is conscious desire, part of that is written in what Satan made when he put us on Earth. I can’t change that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I can’t change it, but I can control it if it is making your life harder.”

“In a lot of ways, it isn’t.”

“But in a few ways, it is?”

“You’re hard to resist, even against my better judgment.” I hesitated. “Yes.”

“Back in the airport, you asked me to set aside my instincts to help you. I’ve tried to do that. I’ve tried to be good when all I have ever come from or known is evil, and I’ve done that for you.” She stood up and walked over to me, putting her face close to mine. “I can do this for you, also. I will not push or entice or tease. When you are ready, you can come to me. I will always be willing.”

Then she kissed me. Not on the lips. She seemed to know what that would do to me. Her mouth brushed my cheek.

“Now, let us find your sister.”

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4

We didn't head straight to Obi. I figured he would find me if or when he found something, and there wasn't that much I could do in the meantime. Adam and Sarah were on the lam, and they wouldn't pop up again until they were ready to cause trouble. Maybe Dante could get me some useful information, but that required that he knew I was looking for him. However Alichino planned to contact him, I hoped the response would be quick.

In the meantime, Alyx and I set about cleaning up the mess. I won't lie and say it was an easy job. It wasn't. Every one of the victims had a family once, before the Beast's power had infected them and turned them into a sort of false Divine. Every one of them had come here looking for a new life with people who were going through the same thing as they were. Outcast from society. Lost and alone.

Sarah had been doing something similar the first time I had met her. Caring for the Awake, the people who could see the Divine. That community had crumbled in almost the same fashion as this one, though the fault that time was squarely Gervais'. I could

imagine how Sarah might feel to repeat the history. It would only lend to her belief that the death and destruction were destiny and not the work of evil.

And Adam was evil. There was no question to that. He hadn't fallen because of me. He had fallen because his soul was turning dark. Everything else was a coincidence. Did God or Archangel Michael know what he and the other archangel had been doing together? I doubted that was allowed in the Kingdom of Heaven. In any case, his true color had shown through.

Black.

Alyx was a tremendous help in removing the bodies. She wasn't at all squeamish around blood and gore, and she set about picking up the corpses with a workmanlike attitude, shifting to her Great Were form and lifting three or four at a time. Their blood spilled onto her, matting her fur and leaving her looking as if she was coming in from a battlefield. She didn't comment on it, only taking a few minutes to vanish to Sarah's shower once her part of the work was done.

In the past, she might have paraded herself naked in front of me after, on her way to grab some new clothes. She did nothing of the sort, dressing in private in a pair of Sarah's jeans and a thick sweater. It was conservative to the point that it was still sexy.

At least she was trying.

I used my power to pull the blood together, cleaning it all from the floors and walls and compacting it into a small blob. Then I pushed it out the window and into the woods at the edge of the mansion's grounds, next to where Alyx had placed the bodies. We stood over them for a few minutes in silent reverence before returning inside.

Obi was waiting at the front door as we entered. He had his laptop in his hand, holding it open a crack, so the screen stayed on.

"That was a nice thing you did," he said.

"What was?" I asked.

"Praying for them."

"I didn't say a prayer," I said.

"You paid your respects. You don't need to say anything. It's still a prayer."

"I said a prayer," Alyx said, surprising me. "Not out loud."

Obi smiled. "See. I'm glad you found someone smarter than you. Not that it's much of an achievement."

Alyx giggled. Even I cracked a smile. I had missed Obi.

"Did you find anything?" I asked.

He nodded. "It might be nothing, but considering we're already at nothing, it can't hurt to check it out. It's a couple of days old. I didn't know I would need to look for it, or I would have noticed it earlier." He held up the laptop and opened the screen. I recognized SamChan immediately. The post was a jumble of letters.

"It's a polyalphabetic cipher," Obi said. "The kind Angels like to use."

"Angels use SamChan?"

"Not directly. The Touched do. That's how they communicate."

"And you think this is related to Adam why? He's a bad guy now."

"The text is subtle, but this is an anti-establishment propaganda piece. It's calling for recruits to speak out about unjust practices."

"Unjust practices? In Heaven?"

"Yeah, right? That's why it caught my eye. There's a downside."

"What is it?"

"It's in Italy."

"Let me guess. Near the Vatican?"

"Right on."

I turned to Alyx. "Do you?"

"Si," she replied.

"You can't bring her, man. They'll sniff her out from a mile away."

"Then she'll wait a mile and a half for us. She can cover that ground in about three minutes."

"Damn. What kind of demon are you, anyway?"

"Great Were," Alyx said.

"No way."

"Way," I replied.

"I thought you were done with those things after Ulnyx."

"She's a special case," I said, putting my arm around her shoulders.

Obi looked at us for a few seconds, his left eyebrow going up. "Oh. I see how it is." He looked over at Alyx again. "You said a prayer?"

"Landon's been telling me that being born evil doesn't mean living evil," she replied. "That I can choose for myself."

"Mephistopheles changed," I reminded him.

“Okay. I hear you. So you’ll wait in reserve nearby. It’s cool. That means it’s you and me up close to the action, Landon.”

“I was expecting as much. You’re sure you won’t be recognized?”

“The call was for the Touched. I’m not exactly Touched, but you know I lean good. I don’t think I’ll stand out in that crowd. You, on the other hand?”

“I won’t stand out at all.”

“Can you teleport us to Italy?”

I shook my head. “No. It wears me out to move like that, and if I do again now, I won’t have anything left to deal with Adam if he shows up at the party.”

“We only have a few hours.”

“There’s a benefit to knowing demons.”

Obi made a face. “Damn. I hate moving through rifts.”

“I’ve got some contacts in the area,” I said. “Alyx, did you know Lylyx?”

“No.”

“Really? She was Ulnyx’s mate. She took control of their pack when he left. She helped me fight the Beast. Well, the whole pack helped me fight the Beast. There weren’t many of them left, but the ones that made it out are staying out of sight out in the countryside near Rouen.”

“They won’t have the power to create a rift,” Alyx said.

“No, but they’ll know the fiend who does.”

“All right,” Obi said. “Enough chit-chat. You have a plan, let’s get moving.”

“It isn’t much of a plan,” I said.

“When is it ever?” he replied. “You’ve always done okay making it up as you go.”

“Sarah’s gone,” I said, feeling the pain of it in my soul. It was going to be my fault if she went full-evil. “I wouldn’t call that okay.”

He didn’t try to console me, or convince me I was wrong. I had always admired that about him.

“All the more reason to hurry,” he said.

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5

The chateau Sarah had been living in had belonged to Gervais before she had taken residence there. I had never been in favor of her decision to make it her home base after everything that had happened in that location, but she was of a mind that she could convert all of that evil energy into something good. When she had opened her home to the changelings and started getting more serious with the only one of them that had become an angel instead of a demon, I had started to believe that she could succeed in that goal.

Now Brian was buried out in the back with the others, and my initial fears had been realized. Normally, I preferred being right about things and having my distorted worldview confirmed.

Not this time.

Being Gervais' former estate, there was a large collection of expensive cars being stored in the garage beside the main chateau. I had taken a Ferrari from there once, picking almost at random from the group. I grew up in the city and didn't care that much about cars. Obi was a different story. He pointed each one out to me as we

walked the aisles, running down stats that were meaningless in my ears. Torque, horsepower, camshafts, turbo.

Whatever.

I knew he was talking because he was nervous. He felt responsible for Sarah, the same way I did if not more. He had been here with her. Maybe he should have seen the signs? How could he, when he didn't know what to look for? I didn't blame him, but I knew he would be blaming himself, and there was no way to talk him out of that.

"We'll take that one," I said, pointing at an SUV in the corner. "It looks a lot more comfortable than these racecars."

"The Bentayga," Obi said, smiling. "Good choice. It's the newest car in the fleet." He paused.

"What?" I said.

"Brian bought that car for Sarah. Did you know it's the only one here that didn't belong to Gervais?"

"Cars don't have auras. Did she ever drive it?"

"Once. She was like you." He mimicked her. "Car? What's the point? Obi, I've got wings." He returned to his own posture. "Half of which are razor sharp. Anyway, Brian thought she'd like to have a car that didn't belong to her old man."

We reached the car. I circled to the passenger side, while Alyx moved immediately to the back.

"I guess that means I'm driving?" Obi said.

"If we hit any trouble on the way, Alyx and I will need our brains free to take care of it."

"I can't argue that." He opened the driver's side and got behind the wheel, hitting the starter and getting the engine going. It had a nice sound to it. "And trouble does seem to follow wherever you go."

"Everybody wants a piece of the diuscrucis," I said. "We mainly have to worry about angels. They'll be able to track Alyx. The good news is that they don't usually want to get involved with her. Too much risk."

Obi looked into the rear view, checking Alyx out again. "Hard to imagine," he said.

She responded by partially changing, her tiny hand elongating out into a massive claw.

"That makes it a little easier."

He got us moving, the door to the garage opening as we neared

it, and closing after we were through. I felt a sense of sadness to leave the place behind again. Every time I had ever visited, it had been for the wrong reasons. I should have stopped by more often.

We were on the road for thirty minutes before anyone spoke. My mind spent the time cycling through every decision I had made since that day in the museum, when I had approached a pretty girl to ask her not to touch the ancient artifacts on display, and she had responded by blowing me to the afterlife. Every decision had so many possibilities, so many outcomes. What would have happened if I had done anything differently?

What would have happened if I had never taken up Dante's mantle at all?

That was where I wound up stuck. What if I had never become the diuscrucis? Charis would have been forced to fight the Beast on her own. True, but would the Beast have ever gotten free in the first place? I had found Sarah, which had wound up leading Gervais back to her, which had led the Beast to her. I had given Rebecca an opening to steal the Holy Grail, which in turn had gotten her involved.

Was the world better off without me?

I had my chance after the Beast was gone. I could have joined Charis in the universe, but I didn't. I chose to stay because I thought it wouldn't be. That I was standing in the center, holding both good and evil aside so humanity could simply be. Was that truth or arrogance?

"So, Landon," Obi said, breaking me out of my head. "You said you were in Hell a few days ago? What was that like?"

I blinked a few times to bring myself back to reality.I looked out the window. We were on a small road in the middle of a green landscape. It felt good to be out in the open. I breathed in deep, taking in the moment. A moment was all the universe would spare me.

"I thought I could do it," I said, not answering his question. "I thought I could recruit people to help me keep the balance. I was wrong."

"You recruited me," he said.

"And you're still alive because you distanced yourself before it was too late. My sole recruit? She's dead. Killed by Gervais. I'm worried the same thing is going to happen to you."

"You're worried?" He laughed. "It's my ass, my decision."

“That’s what Rose said.”

“You can’t control everything, man. You want people to have free will; then you have to deal.”

“I know. But I feel like everything is spiraling out of control. Gervais is here, Obi. He’s on Earth, and he’s gaining power. Even once I stop Sarah, I still have to deal with him.”

“You’ve handled worse.”

“I’ve gotten lucky. That luck is going to run out sooner or later.”

“You think it’s luck? I don’t, man. I think you’ve got help.”

“Dante? He can only do so much.”

“No, not Dante.”

I considered for a moment. “You mean God?”

He shrugged. It wasn’t a neutral shrug.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

He shrugged again, glancing over at me. “He can’t get involved directly, right?”

“That’s a pretty big leap.”

“Leap of faith,” he said. “Yup.”

I was silent for a minute. I didn’t have the energy to try to wrap my head around that one right now.

Obi looked into the rear view mirror again. “So,” he said, shifting the conversation once more. “How did you two meet?”

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6

Alyx and I had gotten Obi up to speed on current events by the time we reached the countryside outside of Rouen. He had listened attentively, throwing in his comments at the right times, and sucking some of the weight out of the story. His part in my war had cost him pretty dearly, but time had helped heal some of those wounds, and he had managed to return to his old self, to the generally positive attitude that had made him such a good friend. It was something I desperately needed, and he seemed to know it.

We pulled off to the side of the road. Alyx climbed from the back as soon as we stopped, taking a few steps away from the strong scent of the car's interior leather and putting her face into the air. She turned with the breeze, her small nose twitching as she sought the scent of other weres.

"That way," she said, pointing off toward a hill in the distance. "Ten miles or so."

"Hold on," Obi said from the car. "Let me check the GPS."

Alyx glanced at me. I smiled, looking back at Obi. "We'll meet you there," I said.

“What?”

Alyx shifted, her body growing and changing, morphing impossibly from a five and a quarter foot woman to a fifteen-foot monster. I didn’t hesitate to climb onto her back, grabbing some of the hair at her neck to stay rooted.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Obi said, shaking his head at the sight.

“See if you can find a road that leads out that way. If not, we’ll find you. Alyx has your scent.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Does it look like you have a choice?”

He produced a pad from his pocket, scribbling a note on it so he wouldn’t forget about me. “See you there, I guess,” he said, waving.

I waved back as Alyx lurched forward. It took her a few strides for her gait to even out, but when it did it was the best mode of ground transportation around. She flew across the landscape, the grass below her a blur as she pounded across the landscape. She loved to run, and I could feel her excitement as she did, along with the joy she got from the freedom. Was she feeling the same joy in being free of Espanto and free to make her own choices? I hoped so.

We covered the distance within ten minutes, the open ground giving her a chance to hit full speed. She slowed when we reached a small picket fence lined with chicken wire. A large herd of goats was behind it, and their heads all perked up at once at her approach, as they began baying to one another in fear.

The noise drew the attention of their keeper, a slight Asian man in a simple cotton shirt and jeans. He had been resting in the flatbed of his pickup, and he sat up and stared at us only moments after Alyx returned to her human form.

“Where did you come from?” he asked, his eyes narrowing as he tried to figure out how we had gotten so close without being noticed.

I looked over at Alyx. Weres didn’t like the sun much more than vampires did, although they could survive in it.

She shook her head. This one wasn’t a were. A fiend, maybe a turned? Not a threat, for sure.

“We’re looking for someone,” I said. “Multiple someones, actually. Do you know if this farm belongs to them?”

He looked at us suspiciously. His eyes stopped on Alyx. “It might.”

“Do you know me?” Alyx said.

“There’s something familiar about you,” he replied. “You remind me of Onyx.”

“Is Onyx in charge?” I asked.

“Yeah. She won’t like it if I let you onto the property, though. Not without her permission.”

“Can you call her? I’m sure she’ll talk to me.”

He hesitated. “What is this about?”

“I’m trying to get to Italy in a hurry,” I said.

“Have you tried the airport?”

“Faster than that.”

His expression turned more suspicious.

“And why would Onyx help you with that?” he asked. “We’re not looking for trouble, or to draw attention. We don’t want to get involved.”

“Like it or not, you’re involved,” I said.

He heaved a resigned sigh and jumped down from the truck. He was even shorter on the ground. He walked toward me, putting his hand out as he did. It started to burn with hellfire. Hard to control hellfire that was usually only found in the hands of serious demons. Who was this guy?

“I don’t like it,” he said. “Not at all. And we don’t want to be involved. I don’t know who you are or who you serve, but I think you should go.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I really need to get to Italy, and there’s only one way that’s fast enough to suit. We don’t have to fight. Just call Onyx for me, and I’ll take care of it. I’m sure she’ll want to help.”

“Last warning,” he said, raising his hand.

I was running out of patience. So was Alyx.

“Landon,” she said.

“Go ahead,” I said to the fiend. “Give it your best shot.”

He smiled, thinking I underestimated him. And maybe I had a little. The hellfire burst from his entire hand, not just his fingers, a stream of heat that I could feel from across the distance.

I didn’t fight back. I let it wash over me, accepting it. It didn’t burn. It didn’t destroy. It fell apart as it hit me, my power negating it, turning it into pure energy that would return to the universe.

“What?” he said when he saw it had no effect. “That’s not possible.”

“Surprise,” I said. Alyx tapped me on the shoulder and pointed

back the way we had come. I turned and saw the Bentley off in the distance, heading our way along a narrow dirt road. “My name is Landon.”

His head tilted to the side. “The diuscrucis?”

I nodded.

He smiled. “Why didn’t you say so in the first place? That car with you?”

I nodded again.

“Come on. We better get to the house ahead of it. I’m Francois, and you are?”

“Alyx.”

He put his finger up and then leaned in a little closer. “My vision isn’t what it used to be. You’re one of them, aren’t you? Do you know Onyx?”

“I’m not sure,” Alyx said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I was taken when I was a pup,” she said. “But I had a sister named Onyx.”

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7

We met Obi in the driveway of the cottage where the werewolf pack was living. It was a relatively small building, at least one hundred years old, though it was kept in impeccable condition. A brick face, a thatched roof, and thick shades were all that could be seen from the outside. There was a minivan sitting in the driveway already, and it almost made me crack a smile to think of a van full of weres driving into Rouen for groceries.

It turned out that Francois was a fiend of no small power, a secret gem of a demon who had decided he preferred the company of Onyx to the trappings of power that so many of his like-kind were enamored with. In a weird turn of events, he had accepted her as his master, even though his control of hellfire proved he could have easily claimed that control for himself. He wasn't like other fiends, and he said that Onyx wasn't like other weres, either. She didn't eat human flesh or blood except to stay alive, and that blood was typically stolen from hospitals or purchased on the black market from others who had stolen it from hospitals.

Why?

Because Ulynx had dedicated the Delta Pack to the Diuscrucis, and the Diuscrucis wasn't in favor of it. Onyx and her followers were all that was left of the Great Were's once powerful pack.

That was my fault, too.

"This looks like something right out of Little Red Riding Hood," Obi said as he climbed out of the Bentley. "How many big bad wolves do we have?"

"Eight," I said, quoting Francois. "All that's left of Ulnyx's original pack."

"How many did there used to be?"

"Four hundred," Alyx said. "At least when I was with them."

We still weren't sure if this Onyx was Alyx's sister. The name was common enough among weres that it wasn't guaranteed. I could tell by the look on her face that she was eager to find out.

"Obi-Wan Sampson," Obi said, holding out his hand to Francois.

"Francois," the fiend replied, not taking the hand. "No offense, but my touch is caustic to humans." He turned his hands over, showing off the demonic runes tattooed into them.

"Yeah, no problem," Obi replied.

Francois led us up a few steps to the front door, knocking three times, pausing, and then knocking six times. He waited a few more seconds before opening the door.

"Onyx, my love, we have visitors," he announced.

It was dark inside the home, but the smell of the weres was unmistakeable, even to me. I immediately heard motion upstairs, following the sound to the corner of the house and down.

She appeared in front of us a moment later. She wasn't a spitting image of Alyx, but she was close. Similar height, similar build, similar facial features. Her mouth dropped open when she saw the Great Were.

"Alyx?" she whispered in a soft growl. "Is that you?"

Alyx's face changed as well, a smile spreading across it. "Onyx?"

"It is you," Onyx said, rushing toward her. The two sisters embraced, whining to one another as they hugged.

"I thought you were dead," Alyx said.

"I thought the same of you. Who? How?"

Alyx separated herself from her sister. "I want you to meet Landon Hamilton. The Diuscrucis."

Onyx turned to me and then fell to her knees. "My Lord," she said, bowing her head.

Alyx looked at me with pride. I was embarrassed.

“Please, you don’t have to kneel to me.”

“You are the leader of the pack,” she said. “It is my honor.”

I had gotten a similar reception from Alyx when we met. All because Ulnyx had tried to steal my body after I destroyed him the first time.

“Man, I wish a woman would do that for me sometime,” Obi said.

“Shut up,” I replied. “Please, get up.”

She listened this time, getting back to her feet.

“What are you doing here in France?” she asked, returning her attention to Alyx. “Where have you been all of this time?”

“A prisoner,” Alyx said. “Landon set me free.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. Whatever you have heard, the Diuscrucis is more powerful than that.”

“I have heard that you have been to Hell,” Onyx said.

“You heard that already?” I replied. “How?”

“We are here to hide from the war, Diuscrucis,” she said. “How can we if we don’t keep tabs on it?”

“Hide? I don’t understand.”

“There are so few of us left and only one male to mate with. Ulysyx. He is almost beyond breeding age, and so far has delivered only one pup. If we are dragged into the fight, we will be extinct before long.”

“Then I’m sorry to say; I’m here because I need your help.”

“You need us to fight?” she asked, her face falling. “I will do as you command, but the pack-“

“Not to fight,” I interrupted. I could see the relief. “I need to get to Italy within the next four hours.”

“You need a rift?” Francois said.

“Yes. Can you make one?”

“No. I can power it, but I don’t have the materials to build it.”

“I thought you just needed some rocks?” Obi said.

“Riftstones are more than rocks. They must have a minimum sulfurous component, or they can’t make the proper connection. Stones like that are not easy to come by on the French countryside.”

“We need a rift,” I said. “I was hoping you would know where we could find one, and a demon to power it.”

“As Francois said, he can power it,” Onyx said. She put her hand

on his shoulder. “You will need to go into Rouen with them. Talk with Gerard.”

“Gerard?” Francois said. “I-“

“Do not talk back to me,” Onyx growled, baring her human teeth at the fiend. The message was received.

“Yes, Master,” Francois said. “I will take them to Gerard.”

“Who is Gerard?” I asked.

“A fiend,” Francois replied. “One of many who have wished to recover the area in the aftermath of Gervais’ demise. He has a rift you can use.”

“We’ll leave immediately,” Onyx said. “Let me alert the others.” She opened her mouth, emitting out a series of shrill barks.

“You’re coming with us?” Alyx asked, pleased.

“Of course,” Onyx replied. “I haven’t seen you in ages, sister. I still remember the night you were taken. So many of us were killed that night.” She lost some of her enthusiasm to the memory. “It still wounds me to think about. But you’re here, now. I never thought it would come to pass. If you have business with the Diuscrucis, you will be leaving again. I want to know you once more before you go.”

“Me, too,” Alyx said. “I never believed I would see anyone from my pack again, let alone my direct family. I’m thankful to God for the opportunity.”

“God?” Onyx said, confused “What does He have to do with it?”

“Everything,” Alyx said, leaving me as surprised as her sister was.

It was one thing to say a prayer for the deceased, another to openly embrace His name. It was a new development and had come out of nowhere. Barely three hours had passed since we had nearly spent the afternoon having passionate, lustful sex. Did she regret her actions as much as I regretted mine? Was that why she had been so willing to accept my decision, or would she have come to the same conclusion regardless?

It didn’t matter. It was where she was right now. It was to be expected that once she embraced her freedom, she would begin testing it.

I was proud of her for that, even if I didn’t completely agree with her assessment. I had been upset with my moral compromise, not because of the judgment of an absent father.

Onyx responded with laughter. “I don’t know where you got that

idea, sister. We are creatures of Satan. God cares nothing for us or our kind."

"I don't believe that," Alyx said. "Landon says we are free to choose our own path. We don't have to be evil."

"No, but we do need to partake of human blood to survive. Does God agree with that?"

Alyx was silent.

"Believe me, sister; he doesn't," Onyx said. "That is why we must beware of the angels in Rouen. They have hunted us before, and they will continue to hunt us until the end of days. That is the way of things."

"Things can change," Alyx said softly. "Right, Landon? I don't have to hate the angels."

She was looking to me for affirmation. For comfort. For all of the things she was, experienced with the world wasn't one of them.

"It's something you have to live with," I said. "But remember that the angels don't always know the will of God. Keep in mind where we're headed and why. They seem to be speaking for God less and less these days."

"Man, I don't know what this war is coming to if a Great Were becomes more devout than the Heavenly Host themselves," Obi said.

Or a fiend serves a were who doesn't eat human flesh. Or a spirit is trapped in a magic suit of armor.

End of days?

It sure was starting to feel like it.

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Obi drove the five of us into the city. I had never been to Rouen before, and I was amazed by how the place maintained a middle-ages feel despite the passage of time and some of the modern conveniences that came with it. I remarked on it to Onyx, who only scoffed.

“The Cathedral is visible everywhere, which means the angels can see us wherever we try to hide.”

What would the angels think of a car containing a fiend of Francois’ power and a Great Were? I knew they wouldn’t leave well enough alone if we lingered too long.

“Bring us to Gerard and we’ll be out of here before they can figure out why we came,” I said.

“Gladly,” Onyx replied.

She had spoken only briefly with Alyx on the trip, and the warmth of their reunion had quickly turned cold in response to her sister’s sudden faith. I couldn’t really blame her. God was a tough pill for some people to swallow, let alone a demon, and I was pretty sure she blamed me for Alyx’s attitude. My guess was that she was

only helping me now because of an obligation to what she believed I was, not because she wanted to.

"Stop the car over there," Onyx said, pointing to one of the few spaces within the city that would accommodate a car the size of the Bentley. "There are no motor vehicles allowed on the streets where Gerard's shop lies."

Obi followed her instruction, pulling over to the side. We piled out of the car, and all of us save the former Marine looked to the sky as we did. I didn't see any angels, and by Onyx's reaction, I knew she didn't either.

"Let's hurry," she said. "We have a clean break."

She led us down a narrow street, then another narrow street, and through to a third. All of the buildings looked the same here; tightly packed and old. There were small storefronts at the ground level, selling everything from food to hats to musical instruments.

"Gerard owns a butcher shop three blocks that way," Onyx said, stopping suddenly. "Francois will take you the rest of the way."

"You aren't coming?" Alyx asked.

She seemed somewhat oblivious to her sister's disinterest. Maybe that was just how their kind was? I had never seen them interact as families before, but I had relived some of Ulnyx's memories. It hadn't seemed that way to me then.

"I need to return home. Good hunting to you, sister."

She turned to leave. As she did, I noticed the streets were empty.

Damn.

I scanned the sky in search of angels. When I didn't see any, I looked to Alyx. She shook her head.

"I don't smell anything," she said.

I gathered my power, preparing for Onyx or Francois to turn on us. What other option was there? Except they didn't. They were as confused as I was.

"What the hell?" Obi said.

Seconds passed while we waited for something to happen. I had never experienced anything like it before. The people left, the Divine came. The fighting started. It seemed almost comical when you thought about it too much, but that was how it was supposed to work.

It came from nowhere, literally materializing in front of us.

"Shit," I said.

The Fist of God pointed its right hand at Francois. Scripture-

laced bolts fired from its wrists, the proximity sending them straight through the fiend's chest and out the other side. He fell over in a burst of sulfur and blood.

"No," Onyx said, changing as she did.

Alyx changed as well, while Obi grabbed a small knife from his left boot. It looked ridiculous next to the two weres, especially next to Alyx, but it was all he had.

The Fist vanished.

"Oh, come on," I said, reaching out with my power and wrapping it around us. "Where are you?" I shouted.

I waited for Gervais to answer. He didn't. The Fist re-appeared when it butted up against my shield. This time, Zifah was seated on its shoulder.

"Nice trick, isn't it, Landon?" he said.

Onyx charged the armor. It disappeared again, and she pounced on empty air.

"An invisible knight?" Obi said. "Man, I thought things couldn't get any weirder."

"You have no idea," I replied.

The Fist appeared behind Onyx; the other wrist pointed at the were's back.

"Landon," Alyx said.

The bolts fired. I threw my power at them, catching them before they could strike her, turning them back on the Fist. It turned to the side, letting them bounce off harmlessly.

Alex pounced, her claws reaching for the demon. The Fist vanished again, appearing a moment later on the other side of the street. Alex wrapped herself around nothing, sliding on the street, spinning around and growling.

"Really, Landon," Zifah said. "Save your energy. I didn't come here to fight."

"Then what did you come here for?" I asked. "You used me."

"I'm a demon. Using people is what demons do." He cackled. "Gervais sent me here to warn you to stay away from Sarah. He's taking care of things, and you need to stay out of the way."

"Taking care of things?"

Onyx had recovered from her pounce, and she charged again, coming hard and swiping at the Fist. It raised its arm, catching the blow and deflecting it with ease. Its other arm swung around, hitting the were in the gut and sending her through a nearby store

window.

Zifah laughed at the outcome. “I know what you’re thinking. Gervais wants Sarah’s power. That’s it exactly. When he finds her, he’s going to take it.”

“That’s his daughter,” I said. Not that it mattered to the demon. Josette was his sister, and that hadn’t been enough to stop him.

“Yeah. That’s what I said, but you know Gervais. Anyway, he wanted me to show off the Fist of Gervais to you, so you would know you can’t win, and you should leave well enough alone. I messed up a couple of times, went to the wrong place, killed a couple of demons I probably shouldn’t have.” He laughed again. “You stand out like a sore thumb as long as you have Alyx with you.” He looked at her. “Hey, sexy.”

Alyx ignored him, keeping her eyes focused on the Fist. If Gervais wasn’t attacking me outright, it meant he wanted or needed something from me. Even if it was just the opportunity to gloat.

What else was new?

“Rebecca, are you in there?” I said. “Can you hear me?”

The Fist didn’t react. Zifah was amused.

“She can’t hear you. She’s barely even there.”

I knew they needed some way to control the armor. Considering Zifah was sitting on the thing’s shoulder, I was willing to bet he was doing it somehow.

“I’m surprised Gervais trusts you with his toy,” I said.

“Why wouldn’t he? We have a deal.”

“A deal between demons?”

“Normally I would agree, but it goes like this: Gervais gets Earth, I get Hell. It works for me.”

“What about Heaven?”

“Heaven gets destroyed.”

“Then Hell comes to Earth, and you get nothing.”

“I know the leftovers won’t be much, but I’m small. I don’t need much. I just want to see the look on my father’s face when Gervais tears his head off.”

“So you’re good with being number two?” I asked.

“It’s more than I ever got before.”

“Maybe we can work something out?”

“A counteroffer?”

“Yeah.”

“Like what?”

I thought about it for a few seconds. There was nothing I could offer him that trumped control of Hell, and Gervais knew it. That's why he trusted him with the Fist.

"I didn't think so," Zifah said. "No hard feelings, Landon, really. I like you. But I have to do what I have to do, you know?"

"Yeah," I replied. "So do I."

The smile vanished. "What does that mean?"

I reached out with my power, grabbing the knife from Obi's hand and flinging it toward the demon. It moved faster than any human-thrown object could. It almost moved fast enough.

Zifah screeched and climbed behind the armor, narrowly avoiding the blade. The Fist vanished again.

It didn't return.

"Was that smart?" Obi asked.

"Probably not, but I think he made the point he wanted to make."

As long as I was with Alyx, I could be tracked. I already knew that. More importantly, I had barely held my own against the Fists before, and now it seemed that Rebecca's power had given it the ability not only to disappear but to teleport as well.

Fantastic.

Gervais didn't need anything from me. He was gloating. Rubbing it in my face. He had tricked me, killed Rose, and won himself a prize I couldn't compete against, and in his arrogant assery he wanted to make sure I knew it. His hate for me ran that deep.

Son of a bitch.

Onyx climbed from the storefront, rushing over to the pile of ashes that were all that remained of Francois. She leaned over them and howled.

A shopkeeper appeared a moment later, followed by a few more mortals. They saw Onyx as a human, leaning over nothing and crying. They ignored her, returning to their business as if nothing had happened. All except the owner of the store that had been damaged, who pulled out his cellphone to report the vandalism.

Alyx approached Onyx, leaning down beside her and putting her arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry," she said.

Onyx glared at her for a second and then leaned into her, accepting the consolation. I bypassed them, walking over to where the bolts had fallen and picking them up.

"Gervais is going to be pissed at Zifah for losing these," I said,

showing them to Obi.

He examined them. “Man, how did they get the scripture printed so small?”

“A laser etching machine and a computer program. It’s all out of operation, which means these are irreplaceable.”

He nodded. “I have an idea for this. Maybe when we have a few hours we can do a little engineering.”

“Whatever you’re thinking, I’m game.”

Alyx helped Onyx to her feet. She looked at me, meeting my eyes. She didn’t need me to speak to know what I was going to say.

“I’ll take her back,” she said, saving me from having to demean her and order her to stay.

I would have if that’s what it took. I needed to get to Sarah before Gervais did, and now that I knew what I was up against, I knew I couldn’t do that with her so close. Her aura was too powerful, and right now I needed to be inconspicuous.

“I’ll find you when this is over,” I said.

She stepped toward me, and I wrapped her in my arms.

“You know I want to come with you,” she said. “It’s against every instinct I have to let you go without me.”

“Believe me; I want you to come. It’s too much of a risk to Sarah.”

“It is easy to be selfish,” she said. “I don’t want to be. This isn’t easy.”

“I’ll be okay. I survived the Beast. I survived Hell. I always find a way.”

“You better.”

She leaned up, and I kissed her. Not like it was the last time. Not like it would be very long before I kissed her again. I had to believe that, even if I wasn’t feeling it. Things were spinning further out of control, faster and faster with every minute. I didn’t know if I could reign it in.

I didn’t know if I could win this time.

She smiled her cute, deadly smile and returned to Onyx, taking her by the arm and leading her away. I watched them go until they turned the corner and then turned to Obi.

“Okay,” I said. “Now I’m mad.”

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I didn't have that much time to be mad before the angels showed up.

I wasn't surprised when they entered the small avenue, one from each connecting street. There was no way they had missed the Fist, and there was no doubt they would be interested in it. I hadn't vanished from their radar, which meant one had been perched somewhere during the fight, watching events unfold.

Of course, they had also waited for Alyx to leave before closing in.

"It's just one thing to another with you, man," Obi said as the angels approached.

I fought to quell my general frustration. Taking it out on them wasn't going to accomplish anything, and would probably make things worse. If I was calm, maybe I could even get them to help me out.

"Who speaks for you?" I asked before they had even reached us.

"I do," one of them replied.

He was off my left shoulder, a dark-haired man in a sport coat

and slacks. He wasn't wearing a blade, which meant he could summon it. Experienced. That was good. The newer angels tended to be more eager to push for a fight.

I shifted to face him more directly. "Landon," I said, holding out my hand.

He took it readily. That was a surprise.

"Alfred," he said. He looked over at the broken store window. "We saw the battle."

"It wasn't much of a battle."

"Anything that keeps the Diuscrucis in a stalemate is an immediate concern to us."

The rest of the angels arrived. There were six in all. They gathered around, not threatening, but making it clear they didn't want us to take off without saying goodbye.

"It's a pretty big concern to me, too. Jane didn't fill you in?"

"She did," Alfred said. "We have been watching out for the Fist, and for you. We didn't expect it to display that level of power."

"Neither did I."

"Gervais has caused problems in this area in the past. For years the Cathedral was home to only two or three angels at a time, because he would see us killed if we tried to gather in numbers. We attempted to rally against him one time. He and his followers slaughtered nearly a dozen of us that day."

Alfred said it like he had been there. He probably had.

"I take it you knew Josette?" I asked.

He nodded. "I was her mentor during her first assignment. She was a beautiful angel. So pure of heart and strong of spirit. Her fall was unfortunate. Her return to Heaven glorious."

That one caught me off-guard.

"Return to Heaven?" I asked. Her soul had been trapped inside me, and it had taken the work of a djinn to set it free. I had always assumed it had gone to the universe, like Charis or Abaddon.

Alfred smiled. "Yes. You didn't know? When you freed her, the Lord gathered her once more into His arms and gave her a choice. She chose to return to His Kingdom as an acolyte, to spend her eternity in prayerful meditation."

"I didn't know. Is she happy?"

"As happy as all of His children in Heaven are, yes, I believe so. Acolytes are not permitted to leave the boundaries of their convents, nor speak beyond prayer. I have seen her, though. She

looks content."

I was happy to hear the news. It was almost enough to wash away some of my anger.

"The Fist is a problem," I said. "And one that's going to get a lot worse in a hurry. Are you familiar with Adam?"

"Yes. He is fallen."

"Yeah, and he's taking his evil roadshow a little too far. He's convinced Sarah to join him."

"Sarah? The true diuscrucis?"

"That's the one. Gervais has set his sights on her before. He's got her targeted again. And Adam is using her already. He plans to destroy all of the Divine."

"All?" one of the other angels said. "That isn't possible."

Alfred raised his eyebrow toward the seraph. That was all it took to put him back in line.

"Dark days are coming to the world, Diuscrucis," he said. "The archangels have sensed it. When you defeated Adam, you set something in motion that may be too big to stop. Machinations centuries in the making."

"I stopped the Beast," I said. "I can stop this."

I said it. That didn't mean I completely believed it.

"It may be beyond even your ability to stop. We believed Sarah was on the path to good. Brian was such a positive influence on her. If she has turned, the world will burn. That is how it is written. That is how it will pass."

"I don't believe that destiny is immutable," I said. "God gives everyone free will. That means anything can change at any time. Where do the archangels stand in this fight?"

"You know they can't get involved directly. They have tasked us with finding a way to stop Gervais before he can use the Fist to gain control over the demon hordes."

"Do you have any leads on that?"

"The Fist is covered in protective scripture. It is a perfect agent of Heaven."

"Or a perfect agent for a demon who wants to gain control of other demons."

"Yes. And now with what we have seen? My confidence is not high."

"We need to stop it, too," Obi said. "Even if we save Sarah, we can't have Gervais running wild with that thing."

“Yes, I understand,” Alfred replied, looking at me. “It seems we are on the same side once more.”

“Does that mean you’ll stop plotting to destroy me for a few weeks?”

He smiled. “That is not my decision to make. What is your next move, Diuscrucis?”

“We’re trying to find Sarah. We have a lead on where Adam might be taking her, or at least where there might be someone who knows something. We need to get to Italy in the next few hours. To be honest, we were on our way to see a demon named Gerard about his rift.”

“Gerard? That fiend can’t help you. The rift is an artifact from when Gervais controlled this area. He hasn’t the power to operate it.”

“Gervais went right after Francois,” Obi said. “Coincidence?”

“Not a chance,” I replied. “Maybe our lead isn’t as tenuous as we thought. If Gervais is trying to keep me away, he must suspect that I can still get through to Sarah before he can.”

And if Zifah retreated without trying to kill me it was because the diminutive demon wasn’t convinced he could. The Fist was powerful, but it couldn’t act on its own. It needed someone to control it. Zifah had power in his own right, but he wasn’t Abaddon.

And I had destroyed Abaddon.

“I need to return to the Cathedral and speak to my superior,’ Alfred said. “Please, Landon. Allow us to escort you to the airport.”

“Airport?” Obi said. “We’ll never make it to Italy in time.”

“On my honor, you will,” Alfred replied.

I didn’t need to think about it too much. Angels were nothing if not good for their word. If Alfred said he was going to help, and that he would get us to Italy in time, I believed him.

“Lead the way,” I said.

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Alfred didn't disappoint.

He was waiting for us when we arrived at the nearest airfield, a smaller airport that mainly serviced privately owned aircraft, the majority of them being two or four seaters. He brought us to a separate hangar, and revealed a sparkling Gulfstream to us, already warming up as we climbed the steps into it.

As he told it, the jet belonged to a nearby vineyard whose owner donated a large portion of the wine they produced to the Church each year, along with a sizeable financial donation and the offer to use his private jet whenever it was available. While angels themselves had no use for something that could fly, the Archbishop had taken advantage of the offer on more than one occasion, which is why they knew the plane was available. A quick phone call had gotten the wheels in motion, and thirty minutes later we were on our way.

"I've been ordered to stay with you through this," Alfred said as the plane tilted, rising quickly into the air.

I leaned back in my soft, white leather seat, glancing out the

window as Rouen shrank beneath us and the plane banked back toward Italy. The flight would take close to three hours, which wasn't going to leave us a ton of time once we arrived in Rome. Still, it was way more comfortable than going through a rift, or dealing with another demon.

"Can we expect any other help?" I asked.

"Not immediately." He paused, and I could tell there was something he wanted to say but didn't.

"Angels keeping secrets?" I asked.

Alfred looked away. I glanced at Obi.

"What aren't you saying?" Obi asked Alfred.

The angel still didn't look at us. I had him figured out from the moment we met. He had been Josette's mentor, which meant he was one of the good ones. He wouldn't be able to lie in good conscience, and withholding information was as good as lying.

He held out for a few minutes until the jet had leveled off at twenty thousand feet. Obi and I waited patiently, exchanging knowing looks.

"Okay, fine," he said, turning around. "There has been some dissent in Heaven since Adam was cast down."

"Dissent?"

"He was trying to do the will of God. That's what the others believe. They think it's unfair that he was punished for that."

"He was cheating," I said. "Bending the rules about as far as they could go."

"But not breaking them," Alfred said. "That is the contention. Some of the others say the rules are a guideline, not hard and fast. More of them say the rules are outdated and don't align with the needs of the seraphim to fight a modern war against the demons."

"Seriously?" I said. "The laws the angels follow weren't just written thousands of years ago and left open to interpretation. The archangels are still around."

Alfred bit his lip and shook his head. "Some of the archangels are agreeing with them. They're going back on their original beliefs in what the Lord intended when He made His laws. They say that they would not be able to contemplate such alterations unless it was part of His grand design. Some of them even say that because you exist, it is proof of the need to change."

"Because I exist?"

"You're a child of God, Landon."

“I’m a diuscrucis. A cross between an angel and a demon. Half good. Half evil.”

“And still a child of God, as all things are. Even the demons, indirectly. Do you think you would exist if He didn’t wish it?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I had never thought about it that way before.

Alfred smiled at the response. “Something for you to think about. My point is that Heaven is fractured somewhat, with the angels breaking into opposite camps. Those that believe Adam was in the right, and those that believe he sealed his own fate with his actions.”

“But wouldn’t questioning his fall be questioning the will of God more directly than the belief that Adam was simply following orders?” Obi asked. “I mean, if God made him fall, it was because he deserved it.”

“Unless you are a seraph who believes the decision was unjust. Or a mistake.”

“How does an angel believe that God is fallible?”

“A good question, my friend. It is another layer of darkness on the future. The last angel who questioned God’s perfection was Lucifer.”

“And he started a war in Heaven,” I said.

“Yes.”

We were all silent for a minute while the weight of that sank in.

“So the others don’t know you’re here,” I said.

“No. We don’t know who might be at this meeting. Either the angels or their Touched. If word got out that we were helping you, it would compromise your anonymity, and your mission.”

“But if we get into trouble?” Obi asked.

“Two of my flock are following the plane. They will be waiting, prepared to lend aid. It is not as much as I would hope to provide, but it is all we can risk right now.”

“It will be enough,” I said. “So, Alfred, how long have you been part of the fight?”

“I was a soldier in the First Crusade, in 1096,” he replied. “I was killed during the siege of Jerusalem.”

I didn’t know much about the Crusades. I did know that 1096 was a long, long time ago.

“I spent two hundred years in Heaven. At first, I refused to answer the call. I was weary of war. Of fighting. One day, I was in

the Garden, sitting in a field of flowers and praying. A young girl approached me. She was seven or eight years old, with long brown hair and such an innocent, innocent face. I asked her where she had come from, and if she was lost.

““I'm not lost,” she replied. “I came from Rouen, in France. I was killed by a monster.”

“Rouen was my birth city. “A monster?” I asked her.

““Yes. It was like a person, but with fangs and claws. It bit me. It hurt, and also felt good. Then my poppa came into the room with a sword. He stabbed the monster, and it screamed and left. He held me and cried and told me he was sorry, but he had to save my soul. Then he stabbed me, too, and here I am.”

“She was bitten by a vampire. That was when I realized that what they had called a Crusade was misguided faith. This was the real Crusade. The real war. I would be selfish to allow children like her to die while I sat in the Garden and did nothing. I have been here since.”

“So you've fought Gervais before?” I said.

“Many times. He is the worst abomination that has ever walked this Earth, save Abaddon. Perhaps he is worse still, as he always manages to find his way back.”

“What about Adam?”

“I know of him, but my role has always been as a guardian. Our paths have rarely crossed.”

“I have a feeling our paths are going to cross soon.”

“Yes.”

“If there are other angels willing to join him, you may have to kill them.”

“I cannot. Not before they fall.”

“They won't fall until they act out in evil,” I said.

“Yes.”

“That might be a problem, don't you think?”

“It is not up to me to judge their hearts, Landon. If I die for my faith in them, then I die.”

“Even if the whole world is the cost of that decision?”

He nodded. “That is the way of faith.”

I couldn't help but smile. I could feel his influence on Josette. Or maybe her influence on him.

“That's fine for you,” I said. “Just so we're clear, I can't afford to wait that long.”

Alfred's face turned to stone. "I don't like it, but I do understand. My orders are to help you. I will not get in your way."

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“You’re sure you won’t be outed as a conservative?” I asked.

Alfred finished buttoning his coat. It was a crisp night, the wind blowing sharply and scattering trash and dust across the streets.

“I’m not that well known outside of Rouen, despite my service time,” he replied. “I’ve always kept a low profile, and hardly ever leave the city.”

“Did you volunteer to come with us then?” Obi asked. “Or you just happened to be in the right place at the right time?”

“I was the most senior angel available. I have left the Cathedral before, just not often.”

We were somewhere in Italy. Somewhere near the Vatican. I wasn’t completely sure where. The plane had landed, a car had met us, and we were driven into the area through lightly trafficked streets. Then the car had stopped, let us out, and drove away, leaving us to our own devices.

It was fine with me. I was thankful we had made it and hopeful that we could put a swift end to this whole thing.

As if that had ever happened.

It was two in the morning. There were few people on the streets, and those that were seemed to be heading in the same general direction toward something I couldn't yet see.

It was obvious we were in the right place by the auras that surrounded them. Every one of them was painted good, a blue halo surrounding them. They converged in numbers that surprised me, at least a dozen walking the street ahead of us.

I probably shouldn't have been as startled as I was. We were in Rome after all, only a mile or two from the Holy See, where the good guys were dense enough that there were no demons to be found anywhere nearby. It was for the best that I had left Alyx behind. She would have stuck out more than a sore thumb. She would have been a shining beacon of evil in an otherwise crystal sea, a beacon that would have attracted way too much of the wrong kind of attention.

We crossed the next few blocks, slowly winding up mingled with the others. A teenage girl in a long black dress walked beside me, clutching a rosary to her chest and staring down at the ground. She looked over at Alfred, staring at the angel. He made the sign of the cross, which seemed to satisfy her. She smiled, changed directions, and moved further away.

Two blocks later, we reached our destination. The gathering turned out to be located in another church, which Alfred immediately identified as the Basilica Papale di Santa Maria Maggiore. It wasn't St. Peter's, but it was no slouch. A large, open plaza led up a number of steps into the building itself, which was being lit in the late hour by hundreds of candles. As we reached the entrance, a Touched servant greeted us and passed us candles of our own.

"Welcome," she said. "Welcome to the Mass for Change."

"Mass?" Obi whispered as we each took a candle and entered the basilica proper.

"This is unexpected," Alfred said. "Masses are held to gather the attention of the Holy Spirit. I would have thought the opposition would be hesitant to do so."

"Unless they're trying to make a statement," I suggested. "The mass is to ask for change."

"That is true."

We moved into the nave. Many of the seats were already taken, the candles creating an ambient light that unified all of the holders.

Looking back over my shoulder, I could see the crowd would be standing room only.

"We should spread out a little," I said. "I'll take a spot near the door."

"Yeah, good idea," Obi said. "I see a spot closer to the altar. I'll scope things out from there."

"There are angels gathered in the transept," Alfred said. "I will go speak with them and see if I can get any further information. It could be that we aren't the only ones here to observe and report rather than participate."

"If either of you gets in trouble, raise your candle," I said.

"Will do," Obi replied, breaking away and heading up toward the front.

Alfred broke to the right, while I crossed a row of chairs to the left before returning to the rear of the building. I positioned myself next to a column near the exit, crossed my arms, and settled in to wait.

Twenty minutes had passed when the doors to the basilica were slowly pulled closed, the last of the incoming Touched squeezing in behind them. I was amazed at the sheer volume of Heaven's servants in the room. There had to be close to a thousand, if not more, and judging by the languages I heard being spoken, many had come from other parts of the world to attend.

It was a quite a showing for a gathering that Obi had called propaganda. Then again, I couldn't expect him to be unbiased. It was clear he preferred the old way of thinking to the new, especially when his first experience with the new was to watch Sarah murder innocents.

That is if Adam was connected to the event. I wished the link between them was a little more tenuous. That all of these people weren't here to consider doing something God might not approve of.

A bell rang from somewhere within the basilica. It chimed again a few seconds later.

An angel swooped down from the ceiling, landing smoothly in front of the altar.

It wasn't Adam. That much was immediately obvious. The seraph was female, with short blonde hair and a lithe frame.

The gathering had been quiet to begin with. It fell silent at her appearance.

“Brothers and sisters,” she said. “Thank you for coming.”

Her eyes danced across the crowd. They were bright and blue, and they sparkled as they caught the candlelight. I could see her making eye contact with some of the gathered Touched as she scanned.

Of course, her eyes stopped on me.

It was only for the briefest moment, but it was long enough to leave me wondering if she recognized who I was, or if she had simply recognized that I didn’t have an aura. The latter was more likely.

“As you know, we’ve called each and every one of you here to participate in one of the greatest moments in both human and angelic history. A moment that will forever be remembered across the universe. In a few minutes, Archangel Raguel himself will lead a special Mass to pray for the eyes of the Lord to turn upon us, to take up our voices and hear our words in joyful consideration of our needs.”

My ears perked up. Archangel Raguel? I had never heard of them, but judging by the way the crowd gasped, I had a feeling he or she was someone powerful. More importantly, they had come down to the mortal realm to lead the charge. If the demons found out, there might literally be Hell to pay.

“Before that, I wanted to take a moment to reiterate our position. Your brother and mine, the angel Adam, was unjustly cast down from Heaven and made into one of the Fallen, all because he chose to follow the word of the Lord and make every effort to put an end to the Diuscrucis. A responsibility that he was ordered to undertake by Archangel Raguel, after he was given the orders through a vision of Christ himself. We want only for the Lord to hear us, to consider our prayer, and to review His decision to expel Adam from His service.

I hope and pray that He will take our words into His heart. This is about more than the soul of one angel. It is about all of our souls. We dedicate our lives and our eternities to Him. We shouldn’t have to fear that He will cast us out when all we seek to do is please Him. Thank you.”

She bowed to the assembly, and then spread her wings, lifting into the sky once more. I couldn’t see where she landed from my vantage point.

A chant started a moment later. It was deep and rich, in a voice

that was beyond anything I had ever heard before. A voice beyond human. I knew it was the Archangel before I saw him. So did everyone else.

The doors swung open nearby. A robed figure stepped through them. I could barely see Raguel's face beneath the cowl, but his lips were moving as he continued his chant. He walked slowly and alone to the front of the gathering, bowing and kissing the altar when he reached it. Then he turned toward us, lowering his hood and revealing a head of short white hair and a wise, chiseled face.

“In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” he said, his voice carrying evenly to every part of the basilica. “The Lord be with you.”

“And with your spirit,” the congregation replied.

“As we begin this mass for change, let us take a moment to offer thanks to our Lord for his kindness and mercy and care. May he see the wisdom in our words, and glory from our hearts.”

“Amen.”

He began to speak again, a prayer in Latin. I only caught the first few words.

Someone rubbed up against my shoulder. I turned my head in their direction, my eyes suddenly finding themselves trapped against the pale blue of the presiding angel’s.

“Welcome, stranger,” she said, her smile warm and inviting, as if she meant it. Maybe she did. “Adam told me you might come.”

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“You know who I am?” I asked.

“Not exactly.”

That was good. I was starting to feel like my ability to make people forget about me was losing its mojo. Was Adam retaining a vague memory of me, or did Sarah tell him?

“What did Adam tell you, then, exactly?”

“There might be someone in the crowd. Someone different. He suggested that I talk to you, and find out why you were here.”

“He’s the reason I’m here. I need to meet with him.”

“What about?”

“Sarah.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

That didn’t surprise me. Adam would have a hard time gaining support if his followers knew what he was really up to.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Do you really believe God made a mistake? That Adam was treated unfairly?”

“Look up at the altar, friend. Do you know who that is?”

“Archangel Raguel. That’s what you said, anyway.”

“He is the Archangel of Justice and Vengeance. Two things that so often go together. If he believes Adam has not been treated fairly, then I am inclined to believe it.”

“What about Adam? Is he pushing for this?”

“No,” she replied. I wasn’t expecting that. “He has told Raguel he doesn’t want it. He accepts his position.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.”

“It is as Raguel says. He does not lie.”

I looked up at the Archangel again. Adam didn’t want this? Nobody could convince me that was true. If his goal was to kill Divine, what better way than to start a war in Heaven? But then, if I was right, what the hell was Raguel’s part in this?

“So Adam isn’t here?” I asked.

“No.”

“Do you know where I can find him?”

“As I said, friend, he isn’t involved with this gathering. It is his case that has set the wheels of change in motion, not his direct intervention.”

“But he talked to you. He wanted you to talk to me.”

“We were friends before his fall. We remain friends now. I spoke to him recently, and he said to me that if a stranger arrives, I was to greet him and treat him as a brother.”

That didn’t make any sense. I hated when things didn’t make any sense.

“Fine,” I said. “What should we talk about?”

“When the Mass is over, I would like you to meet the Archangel. We have arranged a separate meeting for the most reverend of our followers. I would like you to attend.”

A trap? I almost said it out loud.

“Why me?” I asked. “I’m nobody. Nothing. I don’t even have an aura.”

“That is how I know you’re special,” she replied. “Did you know that Jesus Christ had no aura?”

“Almost every image I’ve ever seen shows him practically glowing.”

“His spirit. It was powerful, but it wasn’t the same thing. There will never be another like him. You are not like him, but you are different.” She had no idea how true both of those statements were. “Please, stay after the Mass, and I will bring you to the meeting.”

“Okay,” I said. I had come here for information. If I was being

invited to the V.I.P. lounge and a chance to rub elbows with the Archangel who was leading the revolution, I wasn't going to say no.

She smiled, bowed her head to me, and then vanished into the throng. I put my eyes back on Raguel. He was reading from the Bible.

I looked around a little more, at the faces of the assembled. Most of them were Touched, pledged to God and the war against the demons. They followed the Mass with wide eyes and open mouths, in awe of the Archangel. I wasn't in awe of him. Justice and vengeance? I didn't trust him at all.

He finished the readings and moved into the Liturgy of the Eucharist, his servants, including Blue-eyes, helping him prepare the altar. He was leaning over it, preparing to speak when I noticed that there was a candle in the corner that was higher than the others.

At first, I thought maybe it was an accident. That one of the Touched was yawning or stretching. I squinted my eyes to dim the candlelight around me and see across the basilica.

It was Alfred who was holding his candle up. His sword appeared in his other hand as I watched.

I scanned the room, searching for the threat.

Raguel stopped speaking.

The entire atmosphere of the gathering shifted. Devotion followed by fear.

Alfred pointed his sword away from the masses, toward the side of the basilica.

Raguel disappeared in a burst of light.

Something hit the side of the building, sending a shockwave rippling along the floor, the sound of the cracking stone nearly deafening.

The door next to me pushed open. A Touched man stumbled in, his robes covered in blood.

"We're under attack," he managed to say, just before he fell to the ground.

I moved to him, kneeling at his side and looking back out the door.

A horde of demons was waiting there. An entire army of every kind of hellspawn I had ever encountered. They hissed and growled, unable to enter the church, but ready for a fight.

Something hit the building again. A fire demon, maybe, trying

to collapse it from the outside. The demons didn't need to go in if they forced everybody out.

I looked back at the gathered army of Touched. They were shedding their robes, and revealing themselves to be armed with blessed knives and swords. No matter what happened next, it was going to be bloody.

How had the forces of evil known about this meeting? Had the demons deciphered the coded message on SamChan? I doubted it. There was only one way I could think of.

The building cracked again, and a huge chunk of stone came loose, dropping from the ceiling. I heard screams as the first of the Touched were crushed beneath it, causing a sudden wave of panic to replace the calm defensiveness. They began pushing toward the exit, toward the gathered army that would cut them down easily in their desperation.

I pushed myself past it, moving out into the night at the head of the line. The demons were a thousand strong at least, and as I stood in the center between good and evil, I noticed the solitary figure hanging in the back on a pair of razor sharp wings.

Sarah.

My heart fell, my sense of reason replaced by pure anger. Whether or not she had arranged this, she was participating in it. She was probably here because Adam knew I was here. Because Blue-eyes had told him. He was using her to mock me, the same way Gervais was using the Fist.

And then there was no more time for emotions. The fleeing Touched raced towards the demons, and the demons charged back. I was stuck in the middle of it, which meant I couldn't just stand there and do nothing.

So I didn't.

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I gathered my power, holding it close as both sides approached, squeezing it within me like a mystical singularity. I could feel the onrush of heat and cool as the demons and the Touched drew ever closer to me. I kept my eyes on Sarah, watching her and trying to meet her gaze. She hovered behind the action, not returning my attention, but not intentionally avoiding it either.

It was as if she just didn't care.

She could have killed Obi, and she hadn't. I knew that had to count for something. At the same time, if Adam knew I was here and summoned an army to challenge me, and sent her to watch, that counted for something, too.

She was somewhere between good and evil right now. What I needed was clarity on that.

The two sides were almost on me. I could almost taste the demons, sulfurous and decayed. I could smell the Touched, their freshly washed hair and their neat, clean clothes. They were both only a few feet away from me.

I released my power, in a sharp line that stretched out from me,

reaching across the plaza turned battlefield. It snapped out like a rubber band, and when the armies ran into it, it pulled tighter, slowing the entire approach, forcing the entire charge to fall apart. I wrenched it back toward me, and opponents from both sides were thrown to the ground, knocked over, or pushed back. I couldn't stop a fight like this completely, and there was no point to try. Angels and demons had been battling for centuries; it wasn't my job to make them friends.

I wanted to get to Sarah. I needed to know where her head was at. I started moving forward, certain that Obi could take care of himself, and that Alfred would come to his aid if he couldn't. The first rows of demons were off-balance from my initial outburst, and I moved past them without intercession.

I heard shouting, growling, screaming, yelping. I heard Touched die. I heard demons die. I waded into the thick, the horde a blur of misshapen faces, claws, and leathery skin. Of course, they tried to attack me. I looked like any of the other mortals. I greeted them with hard punches. I pushed them back with my power, I wrapped myself in it and absorbed their strikes. These demons weren't powerful enough to hurt me. I cut through them as a dervish of energy, batting them aside like matchsticks and making a path through the center, my eyes always on Sarah, growing closer to her with each heartbeat.

I was halfway there when she finally noticed me, her eyes landing on mine for the briefest of instants. I thought I saw her brow furrow slightly when they did; her face flashed a look of absolute sadness and guilt. Then she looked away, over me toward the rear. Then she started moving, to my left where a line of Touched were breaking through and flanking the demons.

She drove in at them, grabbing one by the neck, her wings sweeping around and cutting him in half. She dropped from the sky, landing, ducking, spinning and slashing, cutting two more down with those infernal appendages. An angel joined the fray, sword bright with angelic scripture. Her wings wrapped around in front of her as the sword came down, striking against them and skipping harmlessly away. She threw them out, catching him full in the chest and throwing him backward. He caught himself and charged again.

She let him come. A dagger appeared in his hand, slashing toward her as he rushed in. She dropped low again, putting her wings out to the side and throwing herself forward, past the angel.

Her wings decapitated him, and he vanished amidst the crowd.

I had never seen her fight like this. I had never seen her act like this. A look had appeared in her eyes, a bloodlust that chilled me to the bone. Whatever had been there a moment ago vanished in the midst of the destruction.

I knew I had to stop it.

I knew I was the only one who could.

I slapped my power out, knocking aside a devil who was getting too close, trying to run me through with his sword. Then I threw the power out behind me, using it to propel me forward, over the crowd and into the sky toward Sarah.

I risked a glance back as I did, finding Obi in the thick with Alfred at his side. The angel was a consummate fighter, a true warrior. Every motion was measured and perfect, every strike, every parry. Obi, on the other hand, was all brute force and emotion, punching a demon in the face and then jabbing a blessed knife into its heart.

I came down a few feet away from her, throwing my power out as I landed to clear the area. Demons and Touched both fell back at the sudden shockwave, before resetting their sights on one another.

"Sarah," I said calmly.

She was twenty feet away, standing on the ground. I recognized the Beatles t-shirt she was wearing. I had given it to her for her birthday a couple of years earlier.

She looked over at me but didn't speak. The fire was still in her eyes. The wanton chaos. It wasn't a good sign.

"Sarah, it's me. It's Landon."

Nothing. No response. No recognition. What the hell had happened to her?

She began walking toward me. No fear, either. No hesitation.

"Sarah, stop," I said. "I don't want to hurt you."

She didn't stop. She didn't slow. Her wings folded in, fluttering ahead of her, each scaled tip like a separate knife, already coated in a layer of blood.

"Damn it, Sarah," I said. "This isn't you. Whatever is happening, I can help."

She kept coming until she was too close. I threw my power out at her. Her wings folded in, blocking her face, and the power washed over them, turned harmlessly aside.

She took three quick steps toward me, her face appearing behind

the wings.

“No, brother, you can’t,” she said, one of them spreading and stabbing toward me.

I had to roll away to get clear of it, and I felt the breeze as it slammed into the ground beside me. I made it back to my feet, then backpedaled just in time to avoid the other wing.

“Yes, I can. You don’t have to do this. There’s no such thing as destiny.”

“I’ve seen it,” she said, coming at me again. “I’ve seen it all. How it ends. How it must be.”

“We can change it. You thought the Beast was going to destroy the world, and we stopped it. We beat him.”

“I was wrong. It wasn’t the Beast I saw tearing this world apart.”

Her wings came at me in a flurry of blows that I could barely see, and barely keep up with. One sliced my shoulder, the other caught my wrist. I pushed myself back, getting a little more distance between us.

“The Divine will destroy it, brother,” Sarah said, following me. “Their war will continue until all of it is gone. Until everything is dust. The balance will turn further and faster, beyond anyone’s ability to control.”

“We won’t let it,” I said.

“You can’t stop it,” she replied, a single tear running down her cheek. “You’re causing it.”

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Time stopped.

Her words hung in the air between us, a bullet unlike any other, filtering in so slowly and so impressively that it sucked the universe away from me in an instant.

Causing it?

A ton of bricks would have hurt less.

I had given all of myself, all of everything I cared about and loved, to do the job that I was asked to do. To be at the center of the war between good and evil, to fight the good fight, to make sure that humankind was free to decide their own future. I had made more sacrifices than anyone should have to make. I had fallen and gotten back up, drowned and resurfaced, burned and was reborn.

Causing it?

I was doing what I was supposed to do. I had no secret agenda. No ulterior motive. In that sense, I was as good as I could be and proud of that fact. I knew the balance was becoming more difficult to maintain. I knew that the war had been escalating since the Beast had been destroyed.

Or was it since I had returned to it?

Causing it?

The Fist of God. Sarah. Adam. Gervais. Now a potential new war brewing in Heaven. I had sensed how things were growing beyond control. I felt the pressure to reign it all in. It was the reason I was there. To stop Adam. To stop her.

But had it all happened because I was here? Because I had taken up the mantle of Champion for Humankind? The balance had always maintained itself before Charis and I arrived on the scene. Was Dante wrong? Had he wanted to keep the status quo, and in his efforts destroyed it?

Which came first?

It wasn't the first time the thoughts had come, but they had been solely prompted by my own uncertainty. Now Sarah was telling me that maybe the downside of my existence was the truth of it. She could see the future. It wasn't always clear. It wasn't always accurate, but she knew it better than anyone else.

Causing it?

What if I was?

I snapped back to reality with every sense heightened. I could smell the demons. I could taste the mortal sweat and blood. I could feel the charge of energy in the air.

Sarah was sweeping toward me, her wings aiming to cut me down. At least now I knew why. She thought she could stop it by killing me and all of the other Divine. Did she know about Gervais? She wouldn't be able to stop the Fist, no matter how strong she had become.

Did that mean that Adam wasn't the bad guy? Or was he using her? Did he convince her that I was the problem? Were her visions even real? He had a hand in creating the Fist; surely he could find a way to fake someone's dreams.

I had no answers. Nothing solid to back any of my decisions. Right now, I knew Sarah wanted to kill me, and whether I was the cause of the discord or not, I couldn't let her. Not while Gervais was still out there. Not until I knew the truth.

I threw my power against her again. Once more, she deflected it with her wings. It slowed her down slightly to defend, and so I pushed again, harder and harder with each blow. It was enough to slow her as I backed away, but not enough to stop her.

I couldn't win this fight. We both knew it. I needed to get out of

this. I needed to escape. How?

I could time walk almost anywhere, but that would mean leaving Obi behind. Maybe he could take care of himself, but I wasn't going to do that. There had to be another way.

"Sarah, please," I said, trying to continue the dialog, trying one more time to reason with her.

"I'm sorry, brother," she replied. "It is what must be."

"What if Adam is lying to you?" I asked. "What if he is tricking you with your visions?"

"He isn't," she said.

"How do you know?"

"I've been having them since you defeated the Beast. I've known these days were going to come. I've prayed, Landon. I've prayed that it would change and that I would be wrong."

She changed her tactics, putting her wings out in front of her like a wedge. It was enough to break free of my attacks, to get herself moving toward me unhindered. She came on like a freight train, leading with those impossibly sharp edges.

"He's using you," I said, diving to the side, coming to my feet as she turned, her wings sweeping out toward me.

I smacked one down with my hand. The other caught my side, digging deep and causing me to grunt and fall to my knees. I threw myself back and away as they plunged for the killing blow, narrowly escaping.

"No, brother," she replied, making her final approach. "I'm using him."

I saw her wing rippling toward me. I tried to throw my power at it, but it cut right through. I wanted to duck away from it, but I was too damn slow.

What would happen when I died? I didn't even know. Part of me welcomed the opportunity to find out.

"I do not accept this," I heard Dante say.

Dante?

He appeared from thin air, right in front of me. His staff came up, blocking Sarah's wing and pushing it aside. Then he reached back and put his hand on my shoulder.

I felt a soft breeze like a breath tickle my face, and then we were somewhere else.

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I sat on the grass, my eyes closed. I could hear the faint burbling of a nearby stream, and the whistling of swallows nearby. My side hurt. My arm hurt. My pride hurt.

“Where are we?” I asked, pushing my power throughout my body, using it to begin healing the wounds. I could feel the resistance. These weren’t normal cuts.

“New Zealand,” Dante replied.

“Not Italy?”

“Too cold.”

“You don’t feel cold.”

“Too close to the slaughter, then. Does it matter, signore?”

“Not as long as you can get me back there. I’ll be ready in a minute.”

He sighed. “I didn’t pull you out of that massacre to let you charge back into it. Did you learn nothing, Landon?”

“Obi is still out there.”

“Obi will be fine. He isn’t Divine.”

“The rest of them are. The Touched.”

“And they are going to die, as are every last demon in the army the fallen angel assembled. I’m sorry, Landon. There is no way for either of us to stop it.”

I knew he was right. That didn’t mean it sat well.

“So you know what’s happening?” I asked.

“Si, signore. I was already looking into the rumors when Alichino left a message for me from you. I would have arrived sooner, but I didn’t know where to find you. The Mass seemed the most likely place to rendezvous. I’m just glad I made it in time.”

“She would have killed me,” I said, still not quite believing it. Sarah was the closest thing to family I had. I couldn’t comprehend that she would honestly believe that all of this was my fault.

Unless it honestly was.

“She said I’m the reason the war is escalating. That my presence is the cause, not the effect. Is she right?”

Dante looked me in the eye. He didn’t speak for a few heartbeats, choosing his words before speaking them.

“It is hard to say,” he replied.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It is very much an answer. The balance is a universal truth, Landon. It isn’t under our direct control. It is possible that introducing you to the equation changed the algorithm, yes. But it is also possible that the world would have already burned without you.”

“That wouldn’t mean I’m not causing it.”

“No. But it would mean that your cause is necessary.”

It wasn’t what I was looking for. Then again, I didn’t know what I was looking for. I didn’t want to be right or wrong. I just wanted things to smooth out and go my way for once.

“I can’t hurt her,” I said, changing the subject.

“Landon, I know you are very close to Sarah. I know you don’t wish to see her come to harm-”

“No,” I said, interrupting. “I mean I can’t hurt her. She can deflect my power. Push it aside like it’s nothing. If you hadn’t stepped in, she would have killed me.”

I could still feel the sting on my arm where her wing had cut me. It was healing very slowly.

He rubbed his chin. “I see. Would you have harmed her, if you could?”

“No. But I would have tried to subdue her.”

“Subdue?” He shook his head. “I told you she is dangerous, Landon. I warned you that this could happen.”

“This isn’t like that. She doesn’t want to kill humankind. She wants to protect it by destroying the Divine.”

“Destroying the Divine is the same as destroying humankind. No matter what the ignorant among the mortals think, they cannot survive without Heaven or Hell. The Divine are as much a part of the fabric of the universe as they are, and as such are required to be.”

“What about me?” I asked. “Am I required to be?”

“You’re a different story.”

“Is that a no?”

He hesitated.

“Is it?” I pushed.

“No, you aren’t required to be. Except, you are the only one who can stop her.”

“Because of course, I am. How? I just told you I couldn't hurt her.”

“You defeated Abaddon, Landon. That was no small feat.”

“I stabbed him in the back like a cheap thief,” I said. “And Gervais got away with the Fist. Zifah showed up while I was in France. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“The Fist is powerful, Dante. Insanely powerful. I don’t know if I can destroy that thing either. It’s just like Sarah said. The war is getting harder and harder to control. When the wheels finally do come off, everything is going to crash hard.”

“You have defeated things more powerful than yourself before. The Beast, for one.”

“With help. A lot of help.”

“You have help. Obi. Alyx.”

“I can’t use Alyx. Her aura will lead Gervais right to me.”

“Which could be very valuable if utilized correctly.”

I was going to say something. I kept my mouth shut. He was thinking way ahead of me. I took a few breaths, staring up at the sky.

“Okay. I’m listening. What do you know?”

“After you defeated Abaddon, I returned to Purgatory to begin doing some research. On Zifah for one, as I had never heard of him before. On Adam for another.”

“Why Adam? Did you have a reason to be suspicious?”

“Adam helped create the Fist and is today considered a denizen of Hell, as are Zifah and Gervais. I couldn’t rule out that he would help them learn to control the weapon.”

I hadn’t thought of that, but it made sense. “What did you discover that you decided not to tell me until it was overly important and probably too late?”

He smiled sheepishly. I had hit the nail right on the head.

“I discovered that Sarah had been in communication with him. She was using an old friend of yours to send messages to him.”

“Old friend of mine?” I asked.

“The messenger demon. Yuli.”

“I didn’t think that little cretin was still alive.”

“Si, signore. Working for Sarah. Since she was using a messenger, I couldn’t determine what the contents of the messages were.”

“But she was reaching out to him?” I asked. “Not the other way around?”

“As near as I can tell, that is correct.”

So she hadn’t been lying when she said she was using him. The idea of her actions being solely her responsibility made me feel sick. She had killed her so-called boyfriend and the changelings because she wanted to do it, not because Adam had put her under some kind of spell.

I sat silently for a minute. I knew the truth, but I didn’t want to admit to it. I definitely didn’t want to say it. First Josette. Then Charis and Clara. Then Rose and Elyse. Not Sarah, too.

“Landon,” Dante said in a way that suggested he knew what I was thinking.

“I have to kill her, don’t I?” I said.

“We cannot let her destroy the Divine, and there is no other way to stop her.”

“I can reason with her.”

“Can you, signore?”

I slammed my fist into the ground. “Damn it,” I shouted. I knew I couldn’t change her mind on this. It wasn’t like when she was fighting her evil side, and I was trying to help her. This was the true culmination of her visions. The real endgame.

It was going to happen unless I ended her life.

“I can’t get near her,” I said. “My power is useless.”

“You took only the smallest fraction of the Beast’s power. It was an honorable decision, but also a short-sighted one. Fortunately, you also have one of the most powerful weapons ever made in your possession.”

“I do?”

“Uriel’s blade.”

I had forgotten about the sword that Hearst had trapped Abaddon with, using it to draw out his power and take it for himself.

“The sword is in pieces,” I said. It was in Alyx’s new home in Mexico, sitting in a shoebox under her bed. “Besides, what would I do with it?”

“First, it doesn’t have to remain that way,” Dante replied. “Second, do you really need to ask? The blade steals Divine energy. You can use it to increase your power.”

“You want me to do the same thing I’m supposed to stop Sarah from doing?”

“As a means to an end, yes. Such increased ability might also give you the upper hand against Gervais and the Fist.”

I couldn’t deny there was a pretty solid upside, but it wasn’t all wine and roses. “Only one person can reforge the sword.”

“Si, signore.”

“You know what will happen if Uriel comes to Earth. It’s bad enough Raguel stopped by to make an appearance.”

“Si, signore. I understand the ramifications. That is why Uriel cannot come to the sword. That is why the sword must go to him.”

I nodded. “Good idea. There’s an angel helping me. One of Josette’s mentors. His name is Alfred. He-”

Dante was shaking his head.

“What?” I asked.

“If you turn the weapon over to the seraphim, you will never see it again.”

“What if I make them promise to return it?”

“They will not make that promise. Uriel’s blade is of unimaginable value to them, and allowing you to use it to gather power? It will never be allowed.”

“I can’t blame them for that.”

“Nor can I. Yet it doesn’t change the facts. You must convince Uriel to repair the sword. It is the only chance we have.”

“I can’t convince him of anything unless...” I paused, the

lightbulb finally going on. “You want me to go to Heaven?”

“Si, signore.”

“How?”

“You have allies among the angels. Use them.”

“You just said the angels would never allow me to do what I need to do.”

“You have always been resourceful, signore. I’m sure you will figure something out.”

Not that I had a choice. Dante was right. I was too weak to fight Sarah in my current state. If getting Uriel to fix the sword and killing demons with it was the only way to level up, I had to do it.

“Can you send me back now?” I asked. “It seems I have a lot of work to do.”

“One moment, signore,” Dante said.

He vanished a moment later, returned a few heartbeats after that. Then he reached out toward me again. I extended my hand, touching it to his. A moment later I was standing in Alyx’s bedroom. The sheets on the bed were still in disarray from our earlier near-miss. I crouched low, reaching under the bed and pulling out the old shoebox.

“I can’t believe you put a priceless relic in that,” he said.

“That’s the idea,” I replied, opening the lid. I lifted the shattered pieces of the blade from it and dropped them into my coat pocket. “You should stick around. I could get used to traveling the world like this.”

He smiled. “You know I cannot remain, signore. Though I am pleased to be able to offer you assistance once more.”

“I’ve got the blade. Take me back to Italy.”

“Of course, signore. I will remain alert to messages from Alichino, should you require me again. I will also see if I can uncover anything else that might help.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He replied by smiling and nodding, and then, putting his hand on my shoulder. An instant later I was back outside the basilica.

Dante was gone.

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16

Both angels and demons turned to ash when they died.

Touched? They just died.

As I stood in the plaza outside the Basilica, I was surrounded by them.

It was a grisly scene, made all the more real by the line of police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances circling the area, along with the crowds of onlookers who had come to see what happened. How would their minds process this carnage? A meteor strike? More terrorists? They were always a good mental scapegoat for the damage the Divine caused.

The basilica itself looked as though it had been hit by a bomb. The entire eastern wall was collapsed, as was the dome, which couldn't remain upright without the added support. Scorch marks from a fire demon's sword left dark marks on the steps, and dozens of claw marks were etched into the doors. I could see the emergency workers climbing over the rubble, searching for survivors.

The balance was shifting. I could feel it in my gut. Losing a

thousand Touched was much, much worse than losing a thousand demons. The only good news was that Sarah had to know that. It meant her next target wouldn't be Heavenly. If she truly wanted to save humankind, she couldn't do it by giving the demons free reign.

Then again, if her father got to her before I did, if he had better luck in convincing her she was on the wrong path, there was no telling what would happen next.

Uriel's sword. That was step one. A weapon that would let me increase my power. That would let any Divine increase their power. I was surprised Gervais hadn't stolen the shards from me. Then again, there was no way he would ever get them put back together.

The thought gave me pause. Was that why Zifah hadn't attacked me with the Fist? If Dante knew the sword could be useful, so would Gervais. I had to assume he was waiting for me to retrieve it, and then he would come for it. It was typical. Maybe a little too predictable. I had to assume it was true. If I managed to convince Uriel to reforge the blade and let me take it back down to Earth, there was no way he wouldn't try to take it.

I scanned the scene, looking for Obi. Dante was convinced my friend would be alive after this. I had confidence in his ability to take out most demons despite the loss of his Divine power, but that fire demon had me worried. He couldn't fight that. The emergency workers looked at me as I started moving toward the basilica, but they didn't try to stop me. As soon as they blinked, as soon as they looked away, they forgot I was even there.

I reached the basilica, climbing over the rubble the same way the first responders were. I didn't call out Obi's name; that would have only drawn more attention my way. I did use my power to subtly push some of the debris aside, to make sure he wasn't under it. I didn't expect him to be. The last I had seen of him, he was outside the building.

I was worried, but not too worried. I moved away from the chaos, heading out past where law enforcement had closed the roads. If Obi had survived, there was only one other place I would find him at this time of night.

The bar was called La Tempesta. The Tempest. I could hear the laughter and talking coming from it when I was still two blocks away. It was tucked back in a small alley, on a cobblestone street that time had forgotten, a passage too narrow for any cars to traverse. The door to it was hanging open, the patrons loitering

outside to smoke. They glanced at me as I entered, greeting me with an enthusiastic “Ciao!”

The inside was as dim as I expected, and also more crowded. There was a television in the corner, turned off. The reports about the basilica were probably killing the mood, and nobody went to a pub to hear bad news. The benches at the bar were all taken by Italian men and women, some fair, some olive, none as dark as Obi.

I walked through the place, checking the tables. I was about to give up when a bottle cap hit me in the back of the neck.

I turned around. Obi was sitting against the wall, a beer on the table in front of him. He looked tired, a little sweaty, but otherwise no worse for wear.

I went over and sat across from him. He stared at me for a few seconds without speaking.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I said. “Dante took me. I didn’t leave.”

He smiled. “I know. I saw him. That’s not why I’m staring.”

“Then why are you staring?”

“She was going to kill you, man.”

“I know. She thinks it’s the right thing to do. She said I’m causing the war to escalate, and pretty soon it will be out of control.”

“Unless she kills all of the Divine?”

“Exactly.”

“You can’t stop her.”

“I would have if I could. How did you get away?”

He shrugged. “Snuck out when I saw you go poof. The demons didn’t want anything to do with me after I cut a few dozen of them down. Not with so many Touched to kill. Sarah didn’t see me, or if she did she let me go again.”

“Because you’re human. Fully human.”

“Is that why? I thought she just liked me.”

“She does like you. I’m pretty sure she still likes me. What she’s doing, she thinks she has to do, or the world is going to end. The problem is if she kills all the Divine, the world is going to end anyway.”

“Ain’t that a kicker.”

I smiled. “A big one.”

“So, Dante saved your ass. I figured you’d catch up to me here sooner or later once you saw I wasn’t dead. Did he give you

anything useful?"

"We'll see. I'm supposed to take the shards of Uriel's sword to Heaven, and ask Archangel Uriel to put it back together for me."

He laughed loudly enough that half the patrons in the pub turned to look at us.

"You're kidding me?" he said.

"I wish I was."

"Man, there is no way that is going to happen."

"Normally, I would agree with you, but the balance is shifting. If the angels don't do something, they might end up screwed."

"Unless they know what Sarah is up to."

"Meaning they'll let her balance things out again?" They would never help me if they knew she was going to. "I don't think they do. Not yet. I have a bad feeling Gervais knows what's going down, though."

"So you need another set of eyes in the back of your head."

"Yeah."

"I'll do my best," he said.

"Thanks. I appreciate you helping me out on this one. Especially considering you aren't the biggest fan of the Divine."

"I'm a bigger fan of the world staying in one piece. I know we've had some rough patches here and there, Landon, but I've always considered us friends. Friends just go through some shit sometimes, that's all."

"Agreed."

He raised his bottle to me, and then took a drink.

"Do you know what happened to Alfred?" I asked.

"He was fighting for a while. He's a total badass, by the way. He teamed up with that angel that opened the Mass, and the two of them took out the fire demon. Sarah got to them, though. I saw Alfred try to save the other seraph, but she did something to him and made him disappear. Sent him back to Heaven or something."

"His superiors told him to help me. I was hoping he could give me a lift to Heaven."

"Maybe he'll show up again. He might be looking for you right now."

"He won't remember me. He might come looking for you."

"Good enough, right?"

"I hope so."

"So what do you want to do? Hang out and knock back a few?"

“Don’t you need to sleep?”

“Man, I’m too wired to sleep.”

“I need to talk to an angel. I imagine Sarah’s actions tonight have got them on high alert, and maybe bunkered in. Considering where we are, I know where to find them.”

“Not much deduction needed on that one, is there Sherlock?”

“Elementary, Watson. You ready to go?”

He took one last swig to finish the bottle and then stood up. “I am now.”

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17

The Vatican. The home of the Pope. The home of St. Peter's Basilica. The home base and the largest and most powerful seraphim sanctuary in the mortal realm.

I needed to talk to an angel, and there was no better place to find one.

Of course, these angels weren't friends of mine. Maybe some of them would be lukewarm, but I knew going in that most of them didn't like me, and would have preferred if Sarah's wings had found their way to my heart, or had sliced clean through my neck. Whatever. I didn't have time to worry about that now. My only other seraphim contact was back in New York, and unless Dante showed up right away to teleport me there, or unless I wound up desperate enough to time walk again, I wasn't going to reach her.

No, I had to walk into the lion's den and see if I could make a case. If I failed with the angels, maybe Francis would hear me out?

We climbed the steps to St. Peter's. The square was empty. Silent. We had seen a number of heavily armed guards outside the perimeter, keeping watch for those terrorists. I was sure the angels

were watching us make our approach, even if I hadn't tried to look for them. Whenever they showed up, they showed up. I didn't want to make any moves that they took as aggressive. As powerful as I was, I was on the holiest ground on the planet. They could take me if they had the numbers, which was why I had never visited before.

That I was here, now, would send a clear message. It was a huge white flag. An obvious cry for help. I didn't like submitting so easily, but there was nothing else to be done.

We reached the doors to the massive Church. I pushed one of them open with my power, and we moved inside. I was awed by the interior. The scale. The craftsmanship. The hand of God in everything that was created there.

"Hello?" Obi said, his voice echoing in the empty space.

I had expected there would be a guard at least. The place was deserted.

"Echo," he shouted, smiling as it was repeated back to him, the acoustics bouncing his voice around the columns and arches. I looked over at him, and he shrugged. "Just trying to get some attention."

We waited. Nobody came.

"I thought that would work," I said.

"What the heck is going on in here?" Obi replied.

"A thousand Touched died tonight, Diuscrucis," the smooth, low voice said from everywhere, bouncing off the walls without an echo. "A dozen angels as well."

I knew the voice. I had heard it not very long ago.

"Raguel," I said. "You aren't supposed to be here."

The archangel appeared from behind a column, still wearing the same robes and cowl as before.

"Which is why this place is empty," he said. "Except for you, your friend, and me. The others have been sent away, sent to understand this threat. The real diuscrucis, with blood and gold wings."

"I already understand the threat," I said. "That's why I'm here."

"I assumed as much. If you came because you need our help, then we are already doomed."

"Are you saying you won't help me?" I asked. "Because I haven't even told you what I want yet."

"I could destroy you here and now, Diuscrucis," Raguel said. "Your power is strong, but not in this place." He waved his hand,

and the runes hidden in every millimeter of the stone flared briefly.

"Awesome," Obi said.

"Do you intend to destroy me?" I asked.

He smiled like the Cheshire Cat, his face hidden under his hood. "The laws are the laws. If you don't attack me, I can't attack you."

"But you want to?"

"There have been times when I have wanted to. This isn't one of them. You came to us. It would be ill-managed for me not to hear you out."

"I need to go to Heaven."

The grin vanished, but he didn't speak.

"Is that a no?"

"Do you have any idea what you're asking for?" he said.

"Yes."

"I don't think you do, or you wouldn't ask."

"If you don't ask, the answer is always no."

"Outsiders don't go to Heaven, Diuscrucis. It has never been done."

"Does that mean it's against your laws?"

I knew it wasn't. Dante would have told me if it were.

"No, but it has never been done."

"That's a stupid reason," Obi said.

The cowl shifted slightly, the Archangel looking over. Obi's face deepened in color as he realized he called Raguel stupid.

"I mean, that's not really a reason, is it?" Obi said, trying to backtrack. "I mean, no offense, but Heaven just got owned out there."

"And so did I," I said. "There may be a way to stop this, but the only way to make it happen is for me to go to Heaven."

"Why?"

I lifted one of the shards of Uriel's sword from my pocket. "Do you know what this is?"

His head shifted, leaning forward. Then he reached up and lowered his hood. His eyes were wide. "You have a piece of Uriel's sword?"

"No. I have the entire thing. Unfortunately, it is in pieces. I need Uriel to put it back together."

His eyes bore into me, as though that statement was the dumbest thing he had ever heard.

"Your actions have fractured a family that has been maintained

for thousands of years. You caused Adam to fall and indirectly caused all of those Touched to die, not only by creating the schism between the seraphim but by allowing the true diuscrucis to live in the first place. Since your arrival, the world has seen more death and destruction at the hands of the Divine than at any other time in the history of the universe. That sword in your possession would allow you to become powerful enough to challenge God himself."

"That definitely sounded like a no," Obi said.

"I can't argue anything you just said," I said. "It's all true, and it's nothing I don't already know. It's also the exact reason why I need the blade."

"How so?" Raguel asked.

"Because if I'm gone, and Sarah is all that's left, she'll become powerful enough to challenge God. By destroying all of the Divine, she's playing God. Right now, I can almost balance her out, but she's still stronger than I am. And if I can't stop her, neither can you."

"That's not a compelling argument. If you have the sword, and you do stop her, you will be beyond our control."

"You're saying I'm not already."

"As we established, I can destroy you here and now."

"Only if I attack you."

"For now. That is one rule we intend to have changed."

"Without that rule, you become just like the demons. Can't you see what is happening here? You, of all angels?"

"I am the Archangel of Justice and Vengeance. Vengeance requires action."

"Which is why Adam fell. But you blame me for that. He took action, we both know the consequences. That won't change."

"We shall see. No angel will bring you to Heaven. Uriel will not reforge his blade. I will make sure of that."

"You're going to allow all of the Divine to be killed so that I can't become more powerful? I had all of the Beast's power, Raguel. I could have kept it. If I had, we wouldn't be here, now. I didn't, though. I didn't want to challenge God. I still don't. I don't even want the sword or the responsibility that comes with it. I don't have a choice."

"Easy words to say while you don't control the power. Things have changed. You have changed. Consorting with a demon? Visiting Hell? You are both good and evil, Landon. You will always

be such, and as such you cannot be trusted."

"She'll destroy you. All of you."

"If we cannot find a way to stop her, then it will be as He wills it."

"You're making a mistake, Raguel. A big mistake."

"Go now," the Archangel replied. "Leave this Holy place, and never return to it. I will not allow you to leave it again."

I bit my tongue to keep from cursing him. That wouldn't help my cause any. I knew it was a risk to come here to make my case. I knew there was a good chance I would be rejected. This time. I wasn't going to give up that easily.

"Come on, Obi. We'll have to settle for Plan B."

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18

“Plan B?” Obi asked, as soon as we were off the grounds of St. Peter’s. “We have a Plan B?”

“Sort of. It’s the same as Plan A, except we ask a different angel.”

“You heard him, man. He said he'd make sure you don’t get to Heaven.”

“I also heard him say that the seraphim are fractured. He wants to change things. I’m sure not all of the angels do. They might be a little more trusting of my motives.”

“And you really don’t want to go up against God, right? If you took all of that power?”

“Not a chance.”

“Then what would you do with it?”

“Release it back out into the universe.”

“You can do that?”

I nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell Raguel?”

“He wouldn’t have listened, no matter what I did. He’s got other

reasons to cut me off."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. The more chaotic things get, the easier it becomes for him to push his agenda. To force change to save Heaven and humankind. He doesn't want me coming in and messing that all up. At least not until he gets his way."

"Damn. I hadn't thought about it that way. So, who do we ask next?"

"I'm not sure yet. I've got Jane back in New York. I can go see her, but I can't bring you along."

"If you need to go, you should go. Helping Sarah is the top priority."

I froze for a second. He said "helping," not "stopping." He thought my intention was to bring her back to her senses. To get her to stop. Could I make him understand that she wasn't going to stop? That the only way out would be to end her life?

I didn't think so. Not without a fight. Not without risking that he would walk away. I needed him with me, regardless of the reasons why. Regardless of the truth. I was an asshole for staying silent. I had always been an asshole.

"I need a little more time to weigh our options. Are you sure you don't need to sleep?"

He laughed. "You sound like my mom. If you want to rest we can find a hotel. Don't take too long on this, though. Maybe Sarah is going to go after the demons next, and I know neither of us has a problem with that. It's only a stay of execution for the good guys." He paused. "And for you."

"You have a cell?" I asked.

He lifted it from his pocket and began searching for a nearby hotel. We were both distracted when a figure fell from the sky, landing silently beside us.

"There you are," Alfred said, looking at Obi. "I've been searching the city for you."

"Hey man," Obi said. "What happened to you back there?"

"Kira pushed me back to Heaven," he said. "To keep the diuscrucis from killing me."

"Pushed you?"

"She was of the Heavenly Host, a higher order than a warrior like me. She has… had the power to send me back against my will. She used it." He finally looked at me. "Who is your friend?"

I looked back at him, making eye contact. His face changed as he recognized me.

“This is not the first time we have met, is it?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “You won’t remember me as part of your timeline. I was there.”

“At the Mass?”

“Yes.”

“You saw the battle?”

“I was in it.”

“You couldn’t stop the death of the Touched?”

“I tried. I almost died myself.”

He looked concerned. “That is not a good sign for any of us.”

“Landon was just talking to Archangel Raguel,” Obi said. “He asked him for a ride to Heaven.”

“And he said no,” Alfred said. “It has never been done. Only seraphim and ascending souls go to Heaven.”

“That isn’t true,” I said. “What about Dante?”

“The poet? He was an ascending soul at the time.”

Interesting. I hadn’t known that. “Still, it isn’t against the rules.”

“No. He likely denied you because you’re a threat to his personal motivations.”

“You’re aware of it?”

“All of Heaven is aware of the growing rift between us. Now that the true diuscrucis has established herself, I’m afraid they will see it as an opportunity to create further strife, not to rally around a common cause. Raguel has always been tempestuous. I feared the worst when I saw he was leading the Mass. What do you need to go there to do?”

“I have the pieces of Uriel’s sword. I want him to reforge it for me so that I can collect enough Divine power to take on Sarah.”

“By killing angels?” he asked.

“I hope not. I don’t like killing angels. The balance is in Hell’s favor right now. If we hurry, I can come back and take out a few archfiends, steal their power, and get to Sarah before she launches another assault against Heaven.”

“We?” Alfred said. “You’re not suggesting-”

“Why not?” I asked. “You know what’s going to happen if Raguel gets his way, or if Sarah gets her way, or if Gervais gets his way. Any one of them has the power to destroy everything, even if they think they’re doing the right thing, Gervais excluded.”

“I’m a warrior, Landon. A fighter. I have no jurisdiction to make a decision like this.”

“But you have the power?”

“To transport you? It isn’t much different than recalling my blade.” His sword materialized into his hand for effect. “It isn’t a matter of power. Bringing you to Heaven will cause more upheaval, more fracturing between the sides.”

“Leaving me here will see both sides gone. It won’t matter much then, will it?”

“Admittedly, no.”

“So you’ll do it?”

He was still hesitant. He looked at the ground, whispering to himself. It sounded like a prayer for guidance. Then he was silent for a moment, his eyes falling closed. Maybe he said the prayer again to himself. Maybe he was listening for an answer. Either way, when he opened his eyes and lifted his head again, he nodded.

“I may be forced to Confess for this, Diuscrucis,” he said. “But Josette always believed in your heart, your inert goodness. My heart is telling me to believe the same. I will take you.”

I felt my body relax. I hadn’t realized how tense I was about his decision until that moment.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Great,” Obi said. “I guess I’ll meet you back here?”

“That sounds like a plan,” I said. “I’ll get the sword, and then-”

“No,” Alfred said. “If I’m bringing one, I might as well bring two. We may need the assistance.”

“We?” I asked.

“I’m not going to let you run loose in Heaven without a guide. I’m coming with you.”

“Great,” Obi said. “When do we leave?”

Alfred dismissed his sword. Then he reached out and put a hand on each of our shoulders. I felt a whoosh of cold air across my face, and then we were standing in the middle of a garden.

Because of course we were.

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19

Alfred arrived a second later. He looked different. Not a complete transformation, but there was an obvious change in him that set him apart from us.

"Is this Eden?" Obi asked.

"Yes," Alfred replied.

"For real? The place where Adam and Eve-"

"Yes," Alfred said.

"Can we see the tree?"

"This isn't a sightseeing tour," I said.

"Aw, come on, man. Chance of a lifetime."

I glanced over at him. He smiled. "Right. Where to?"

"This was the safest place to bring you," Alfred said. "We have to be cautious."

"Cautious in Heaven?" Obi said. "Why?"

"This isn't the part of Heaven you're thinking of," Alfred said. "The souls don't have access to the Garden of Eden."

"Too tempting?"

"I accept that you are compensating for your nervousness with

joviality, but in this case, yes. The tree remains a temptation. For many years, such temptation was permitted to weed out certain souls. Those who tasted of the fruit were cast down to Purgatory. Then it was decided that it was an unfair temptation. That those who lived completely lives in service of Him should not have to prove themselves when they arrived here. The Garden was moved to this region of Heaven, off-limits to the rank and file."

"So, we're in the Members Only section?" I said.

"Yes. Technically, you aren't permitted here at all. Technically, I am breaking the rules to bring you here."

"Why do you say technically?" I asked.

"Because you are here, and I have not yet fallen."

"So God is okay with this?"

"It would appear that way, at least for now."

I don't know why, but it made me feel more comfortable to be in Heaven knowing I had the green light from the owner. Of course, I still couldn't quite wrap my mind around the fact that I was in Heaven. Hell had been so much different. It had been obvious from the moment I stepped through the rift that I was there. The Garden of Eden was like any other botanical garden, green and lush, but otherwise normal. Even the sky was a nice shade of pale blue. It was nothing other-worldly. Maybe the clouds were a little too perfect, but otherwise, I could believe I was still on Earth.

"So what's the difference between this part of Heaven and the other?" I asked.

"Have you ever been to a zoo?" Alfred asked.

"I grew up in the Bronx. We have a zoo there."

He smiled. "From the outside, everything looks perfect. The animals look content. The grounds are neat and clean. Behind the scenes? Things may not be quite what they seem."

"You're saying the seraphim are a mess?"

"I'm saying that like all families, we have our share of discord. Nothing like murder, of course, but plenty of arguing. We hide that from the general population. This is their bright eternity, after all. My bringing you here is a can of worms I should like to remain closed."

"I'm surprised you know that idiom," I said.

"I'm not completely out of touch with the modern world, even if I am a conservative old soul. The point is, let us be careful and quiet, and perhaps we can reach Uriel without causing a scene."

“Fair enough,” I said. “Lead the way.”

Alfred brought us from wherever we were in the Garden, out to a worn dirt path. It meandered through the vegetation to what I felt was the east. A spotless series of glass encased skyscrapers could be seen beyond it.

“Keeping up with the times?” I asked.

“Like Purgatory, what you see will reflect your own understanding of the world,” Alfred said. “For me, it is castles and villages.”

“Even though you understand the modern world?”

“Yes. It is what I prefer.”

“Okie Dokie.”

We kept going, staying along the path. We had covered half the distance when Alfred pulled us aside, into the brush. I found myself surrounded by some large, leafy plant with big yellow flowers, peering through the cracks as an angel crossed our paths. I was surprised to see that she was naked.

“Uh,” I said, once she had vanished down the path.

“Original sin is human,” Alfred said. “The seraphim have no sense of indecency to the body that God has made for them. In fact, it is a matter of personal pride, regardless of shape or form.”

“You’re wearing clothes,” Obi said.

“For your sake, as do all angels assigned to Earth. It is understandable if the sight of flesh causes you discomfort.”

“What causes me discomfort is the idea of angels standing there arguing with one another in the buff,” Obi said. “That is my definition of the bad naked.”

“Mine too,” I said.

Alfred laughed. “We don’t notice one another for our bodies. It is the soul that is important. Purely physical attraction is a limitation of the human condition.”

“I can believe that,” I replied. “Since the world will bend to my vision of it, I suppose if I prefer the residents clothed, they’ll be clothed?”

He nodded.

“What was she doing in here, anyway? Why do angels come to the Garden?”

“To pray. To meditate. To contemplate. Heaven may seem a simple place, but in reality, it is anything but. Especially if you are involved with Earth and the war.”

“Are we going to have to duck into the weeds often?”

“Let us hope not.”

We came out of hiding, continuing along the dirt path through the Garden. We reached the perimeter a few minutes later, crossing the dirt path to an ordinary city street. The main difference was that it was empty.

“It would seem pretty easy to be spotted out here,” I said.

“Most of the seraphim are otherwise occupied at the moment,” he replied. “Not loitering around the village. Recent events on Earth and up here have led to more than one emergency gathering.”

We walked a couple of blocks when a thought came to me. “In Hell, time passes more slowly or more quickly, depending on how Lucifer wants it. Is it the same thing here?”

“Our sense of time here is more vague than even that, but while you are here, you will experience time as though you were still on Earth. It is easier that way.”

“Hey, who works there?” Obi said. I turned to see him pointing in the distance. I followed his finger to the largest of the skyscrapers, a huge block of turning glass that looked like human DNA.

“That is the Council building,” Alfred said. “It is where the Archangels reside and hold discourse.”

“Archangel Michael is in there?” Obi said.

“Yes, as is Raguel if he has returned.”

“What about Uriel?”

“Uriel refuses to sit on the Council. He chooses an eternity of hermitage to atone for his creation of the sword.”

“Hang on,” I said. “You’re saying he’s unhappy that he made the sword?”

“Of course. He created a very powerful and very deadly weapon. Why would he be happy about that?”

“I thought it was made during the war in Heaven when Lucifer was cast out?”

“It was. All the more reason to feel sorrow and lament its existence.”

“But I need to ask him to remake what has been broken. To return its power to it. If he’s that sorry he made it, why would he ever do that?”

“For the same reason he made it the first time, I suppose. To save good from evil.”

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We didn't stay on the streets for long, wandering off the beaten path to a series of back alleys and smaller crossroads. It was a part of Heaven it seemed that even the angels had mostly forgotten. It wasn't as squeaky clean as the rest, with a layer of dust or something that seemed to be resting on every sidewalk, every lamp post, every nook, and cranny.

It was weird that there were lamp posts in Heaven. It was weird that it was modern. It wasn't my first time experiencing such a thing. Purgatory was the same, and the Box had been controlled by the stronger mind. The Beast's at first, and then mine. I knew how to reshape what I saw to my will, but nothing I did removed the dust.

"What is this stuff?" I asked.

"The remains of angels who have been killed in Heaven," Alfred replied. "Most of it is from the war." He paused, shaking his head. "Most. Not all."

"What happens if an angel is killed in Heaven?" I asked. "I see they turn to dust like on Earth, but where does the soul go?"

“Nowhere. It ceases to be.”

“As in nothing?” Obi asked.

“Yes. It is the worst fate imaginable. That is why God reacted so strongly to the war. That is why Hell had to be created. A crime such as ending a soul completely is unforgivable.”

“What about setting it free?” I asked. “To be part of the Universe?”

“Only God can do that if He chooses.”

I didn’t tell him that I knew that trick, too. I was glad to hear it wasn’t the worst thing.

“How much further to Uriel?” Obi asked.

“Not much,” Alfred said. “We’re near the edge of the city now. His home is only a mile or so past it.”

“Let me guess, a light blue house with a white picket fence?” I said.

“Not quite,” Alfred replied.

“I have to say; Hell was a lot more interesting than this.”

“Debauchery usually is. The overload of the senses causes both mortal and seraph to give in to temptation. A life of prayerful meditation may not be as acutely exciting, but I would argue that it is infinitely more fulfilling.”

I couldn’t counter the point. Not when I had never experienced the meditative state he was referring to. Not that I hadn’t tried. It was a hard place to get to, and a hard place to stay. The souls in Heaven probably spent their eternity trying to master it.

We finally reached the end of the city, which fell away abruptly into a series of verdant hills that undulated across the landscape. We walked a single-lane street that was lined with trees, all of them in a state of bloom that left an explosion of color everywhere I looked. Heaven was more boring than Hell, but it was also a lot more beautiful.

“Is there anything I should know about Uriel before I meet him?” I asked.

“Be strong in your conviction. Be confident in your desire. Be pure of heart and conscience. If you believe the sword is truly the only way to save us, Uriel will sense it in your heart. That will earn you his trust.”

I could do that. I knew without question this was the only way. Sarah had made that painfully obvious with the wounds she had inflicted on me already.

Uriel's home didn't have a white picket fence. It did have a wrought iron fence, twelve feet high and spiked on top, each one of the bars etched with more runes that I would have believed could fit in such a small space. I could see his house behind it, a large stone building that looked dim and heavy compared to the brightness of the surrounding countryside, as if a cloud was always hanging over it, dumping rain and sadness and depression down on the angel. And maybe it was.

"Why does he need runes up here?" I asked.

"The fence was made right before the war began. It was to protect us from the usurper. From Lucifer and his army. As the legend goes, Archangel Raphael stood guard for three years while Uriel made the sword, and upon its completion he carried it to the front lines, to Michael. There, Michael began to fell his enemies with the blade, taking their power until he was strong enough to confront Lucifer directly. Only the sword became lodged in Lucifer's chest, and when God cast him down into Hell, the sword went down with him, shattering before it reached the dark plane and spreading across the Earth."

"It seems impossible that someone found all of the pieces," I said. I didn't know who had done that bit of work. Right now, I was grateful for it.

"I imagine it took thousands of years," Alfred said.

"Can we get inside?" Obi asked.

"The gate is open," Alfred replied, pointing ahead to the front of the property.

The gate was hanging open. It seemed like it had been that way for a long, long time.

"Remember, Diuscrucis," Alfred said as we reached the front door. "Be confident."

"Confident. Right."

I put up my hand to knock on the door. Then I noticed it was open a little. I glanced over at Alfred. It didn't seem to me that a self-imposed hermit would make it this easy for people to come and visit.

"Something feels wrong about this," I said.

"I agree," Alfred said. "Let me go in first. I will make sure it is safe for you."

"Okay. Holler if you need backup."

He didn't call for his blade. Instead, he stepped forward to push

on the door.

Before he did, a robed figure appeared in it, small and slight. The form was immediately recognizable to me, despite the hood that covered her face.

“Landon,” Josette said, lowering her cowl and looking up at me. “Uriel isn’t here. Raguel has ordered him to stand with the Council. We need to get you out of sight before he knows you are here.”

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I didn't respond. How could I? I was too busy staring at her, suddenly unable to breathe. Josette. I had never thought I would see her again. Even being here, I had never imagined I would have the chance.

She wasn't the child I had known on Earth. Not anymore. She was older now, an adult, but still as naturally beautiful as she had always been. More so. The wisdom of her age was written on her flesh in a way that suited her much better than the immaturity of youth.

I moved toward her, leaning over and wrapping her in a tight hug. I felt her hands tighten around my back. I had missed her more than she would ever know.

"How?" I said, letting go. I couldn't get any of the other words out.

"We are bonded, you and I. I knew you had come the moment you arrived. In my heart, I knew I had to come to you, to warn you. It isn't safe for you here. It may not be safe for any of us."

"What do you mean?" Alfred asked.

“The Council is meeting over what they are calling the Massacre. Raguel and some of the others are arguing for immediate action, while Michael is urging peace and calm. Many of our brothers and sisters are upset that so many were killed, and we cannot retaliate. They say by attacking so many she attacked us all, and we should be permitted to fight back. Michael states only the Will of the Lord.”

“Retaliate against what?” Obi said. “Sarah? By the way, it’s good to see you again, Josie.”

“You as well, Obi-wan.” She smiled at the name, and then returned her attention to me. “Yes. They want to track down Sarah and kill her.”

“They do know they don’t have the power, right?”

“I don’t think so. They believe they can overwhelm her. And if that fails, Raguel is willing to risk being discovered on Earth.”

“And create Armageddon, all because he doesn’t want me to take care of this?”

“All because this is the best chance they’ll ever have to push their agenda,” Obi said.

Josette shifted her gaze, looking past me, scanning the sky. “They took Uriel because Raguel knew you would keep trying to come here, and as long as you can’t reach him, you can’t reforge the blade. It was a mistake to tell him about it.”

“Hindsight,” I replied.

“Perhaps. They also took him so that if they can get the blade from you, Raguel can use it to increase his power and challenge Sarah directly.”

“Like Michael did to Lucifer,” I said.

“Yes. Only if Raguel gains that much power, I fear he will become like Lucifer. He is too angry. Too vengeful.”

“We need Uriel if we’re going to do anything with the sword,” I said. “What are we supposed to do?”

“First, we must get you away from here. Follow me.”

Josette ducked back into the house. We trailed behind her, following as she made her way through the structure. It was definitely the home of a hermit. The stone was dark and damp, and there were few windows to allow the light in. Only the burning embers of a forge that had been long ignored gave the space any illumination at all.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Back to the Convent. There is a special passage from here to there.”

“What was Uriel doing with a secret passage to the Convent?” Alfred asked.

“The Sisters would meet him daily for confession,” Josette replied. “Even after all these years.”

I heard a thump from the front of the house. Someone pushed the door the rest of the way open.

“They must have seen you,” Josette said. “Hurry.”

She picked up the pace, and so did we. I could hear the footsteps behind us, moving through the house, searching for signs of our passing. I couldn’t believe I was running away from angels. Then again, this wasn’t Earth. The Archangels had full reign here. Even if they didn’t kill me, they could still detain me, hold me until it was too late.

“In here,” Josette said, leading us into a storage room. It was filled with barrels that in turn were filled with ingots of metal that looked sort of like iron, but seemed to glow despite the lack of light. I had seen the same glow on some of the blessed swords the angels carried.

Josette pushed one of the barrels aside, revealing a ladder beneath. “Climb down.”

We did. She took up the rear, moving the barrel back in place behind us.

“Whoa,” Obi said.

We had gone down into a small chamber filled with candles. At the rear of it was the most beautiful metal crucifix I had ever seen, plated in gold and platinum and emitting its own light. My body tingled at the sight of it.

The front of the chamber had a simple stool, and ahead of that a screen. Josette opened the screen, revealing the other side of the confessional and the tunnel leading away from the house. The angels searching for us reaching the storage room as we approached it, their feet loud over our heads.

I put my finger to my lips, and we remained still. They retreated a few heartbeats later, signaling us to resume our escape. We passed across the screen to the tunnel, and then Josette closed it all behind us once more.

She motioned for us to remain silent as we moved down the tunnel. As Alfred had already told me, the Sisters didn’t speak. I

wasn’t sure if she was allowed to, or if these were all the words we would get to share. If they were, I would treasure them and the chance to have heard her voice and seen her face one more time.

Even so, I hoped they weren’t. Seeing the crucifix had placed a sudden, immediate weight on my soul. A sense of guilt I had never experienced before. I didn’t understand it. I didn’t want it. I didn’t seem to have a choice.

As if things couldn’t get any more complicated.

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We reached the end of the tunnel, which opened out into another dimly lit structure. Josette remained silent as she guided us out into a hallway, down to an adjacent corridor, and then across to a simple door. She opened us, motioned us in, and then closed it behind us, leaving us alone.

“It is permitted to speak in here,” Alfred said, breaking the silence.

“You told me you'd been here to see Josette before,” I said.

The angel nodded.

“Where did she go?”

“She must inform her superior that we are here.”

“Won’t that lead Raguel to us?” Obi asked.

“No. The Sisters hold everything in confidence. This is the safest place in Heaven for you to be.”

“Maybe, but staying here for long is the same as being held captive,” I said.

“I don’t expect we will be staying. We need time to determine how to reach Uriel without drawing Raguel’s attention. It will be

difficult while he is being held up at the Council."

The door opened, and Josette re-entered. "Difficult, but not impossible," she said. "The Mother has agreed to see you."

"The Mother?"

She came in behind Josette. She was a large woman, with a big, solid frame and a large, jovial face. She reminded me of the Dalai Lama.

"The Diuscrucis," she said, looking at me. Her eyes traveled head to toe, and my guilt increased a hundredfold. It was as though she saw right through me. She turned her attention to Josette. "We cannot help him until he confesses. His soul is not ready."

Josette looked concerned. "Mother Hahn," she started to say.

"No. I'm sorry, child. You know our purpose."

"Yes, Mother," Josette said.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Mercy," Mother Hahn said. "The Lord grants mercy to all who ask for it. It is this mercy which cleanses the soul. Mercy that gives us strength to carry on. Mercy that leads us down the path of the righteous and just. By confessing your sins, you will learn the healing power of His mercy."

"What if I don't want it?" I said.

"Then you cannot be helped, and you cannot be saved. If you will not confess, we have no more to discuss."

I opened my mouth to argue before stopping myself. Why was I arguing, anyway? I was in Heaven, speaking to an angel. I couldn't reason with her, and I knew it. Besides, my soul was screaming out to me to do it. Maybe I was half-evil, but that didn't mean doing bad things ever felt good in the end. What if asking for forgiveness would lighten the burden I had felt since even before I had escaped the Box?

"Can I confess to Josette?" I asked.

"You may confess to any of the Sisters," Mother Hahn replied.

"Will you?" I asked.

Josette smiled. "Of course, Landon." She bowed to the Mother and then motioned for me to follow without speaking.

We went out into the hallway, back the way we had come. She led me to a small confessional, one in a row of confessionals. I could hear muffled whispers as we passed them. There were others already inside.

"I thought confession was a punishment?" I said as we sat. She

was on one side of the screen, and I was on the other.

"That is a different kind of confession," she replied. "And yes, that is a punishment. This is not."

"Do you confess?"

"At least once per week."

"What for?"

She giggled. "That's none of your business."

Right. "But I can't imagine what you would have to ask for forgiveness for. You're living in a cloistered community and spending almost all of your time in prayer."

"Thoughts still enter my mind that are unfit for such pursuits," she said. "Are you stalling?"

"Sort of," I admitted.

"Why?"

"I'm afraid if I start talking, I'm going to fall apart."

"The Mother could sense the pain in your soul, Landon. You are already falling apart."

That simple statement hit me like a hammer. I felt my eyes welling up already, and I hadn't said anything yet. Damn.

"I'm not sure what to say," I said.

"Say whatever feels natural. There is no right or wrong."

We sat in silence for a minute. Then another. This was harder than I was expecting. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know where to start.

"Landon," Josette said at last. "We have been friends since the moment we met. You saved my life. You saved Sarah's life. God had a plan for me, and I believe for you as well. Do not be afraid."

The tears started coming for real when she said that, running down my face and dripping off my chin.

"I've failed you," I said. "I've failed everyone. I put myself first. I put my lust first, my desires first, my needs first. I wasn't there for Sarah when she needed me."

I paused, trying to catch myself, trying not to say the words I didn't want to say. I felt the pressure on my soul, the weight that was threatening to crush me. Was God doing this to me? Was that even possible?

"I promised you I would protect her. I have to kill her."

I waited in silence for her judgment, the tears continuing to come. How could she forgive me for that? How could anyone forgive me for that? Thou shalt not kill. It was the most basic law in

the Universe, and I had done it so many times.

"Please, forgive me," I whispered.

A few more seconds of silence passed.

"I forgive you," Josette said. "And the Lord forgives you. Your road has not been an easy one, my friend. Your journey to Him filled with struggle and pain. But He loves the least of us most of all and welcomes those who have failed and yet wish to succeed. In His mercy, may you find peace and strength and courage. When the time comes, I know you will do the right thing. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I absolve you."

I don't know what I expected to happen. I don't know if I expected anything to happen at all. I wasn't the most religious guy around, and I certainly hadn't been following the word of the Lord very much, if at all. Even so, I could sense the change in myself. The lightening of my guilt, a feeling of peace and calm, and a realization that maybe there was another choice when it came to Sarah. Maybe when the time came, I wouldn't have to end her life.

I wiped my eyes until they were dry and then stepped out of the confessional. Josette was already in the hallway, and she gave me a hug as I emerged, almost causing me to tear up again.

"All will be well, Landon," she whispered. We both knew she wasn't supposed to be talking right now. "Do not underestimate the power of your spirit."

I nodded, staying quiet. She led me back to the room where Obi, Alfred, and Mother Hahn were waiting. The Mother looked me over again as I entered, and this time, when her eyes pierced me I didn't feel such an incredible sense of shame.

"Not perfect, but it will do," she said.

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Mother Hahn and Josette vanished from the room immediately after the Mother declared me “good enough.” I still wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but I imagined that the improvement in my personal psyche was somehow visible to her, and she had decided it was acceptable. To be honest, the whole thing was still a bit of a mystery to me, though I was very glad I had been given the opportunity to confess to Josette. It was her child at the center of the storm, after all.

“Where do you think they went?” Obi asked some time later.

An hour had passed. Maybe two.

“To go talk to the Council on our behalf?” I suggested. “Alfred, do you know?”

He shook his head. “I am not invited into the affairs of the Sisterhood. Before today, I didn’t allow that they ever left the Convent grounds.”

“Even a thousand-year-old angel can learn something new,” Obi said. “There’s still hope for me.”

“Whatever it is, it’s taking a long time. I don’t know if that’s a

good thing or a bad thing."

"Come on, man. This is you we're talking about. Whatever happens, it's a bad thing."

"Funny."

Obi put his hand on my shoulder. "Seriously, if they don't show up soon, I think we should head out on our own."

"I'm starting to agree."

Another ten minutes went by. I was giving heavier weight to the idea of breaking out when the door to the room opened, and Josette swept in.

"What's happening?" I asked. She looked troubled.

"Mother Hahn was trying to get an audience with Archangel Michael, to discuss Raguel's actions and call him out on them. He refused to see her."

"Why?"

"Apparently, because he's in agreement with Raguel."

I froze. "What?"

"My feelings exactly. Michael is at the top of the hierarchy within Heaven, second only to the Holy Trinity. The idea that he has begun to question God is unfathomable."

"This is worse than I thought."

"It is worse than any of us thought."

"Okay, so how do we stop it?"

"We can't stop it. Landon, Michael ordered Mother Hahn to turn you over to the Council."

"Will she?"

"She has no choice if you are still here when she arrives."

"Where is she?"

"Tied up with some other official business, I'm afraid," she said, winking.

Then she lifted her robe over her head and dropped it on the floor. She wasn't nude, at least not to my eyes. She was wearing loose fitting clothes that resembled a karate gi. A pair of wooden sticks sat on her hip.

"Mother Hahn will do her best to keep His Excellency occupied while we make our escape."

"Our escape?"

"She has ordered me to accompany you. I can't return to the mortal realm, but I can assist you here, as can my sisters. They are waiting at the southern entrance."

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Won’t you get in trouble for this?”

“We are taking a tremendous risk, but the need is great, and Mother Hahn believes that you will do the right thing. When you shed your defenses, your soul is more good than it is evil. You can stop Sarah, and save her. I know you can.”

I wasn’t as confident about that as she was, but I was hopeful. I followed her as she left the room again, with Obi and Alfred behind me. There were other Sisters in the hallway, but they largely ignored our passage, looking away as we turned the corner.

“Out here,” Josette said, bringing us to a final hallway.

We paused at the end of it. Josette’s sisters were already sitting on the floor, their hands bound by rope. Four angels were blocking the exit.

“Sister,” one of them said. “The Diuscrucis is ordered to turn over the shards and await return to the mortal realm. This directive came directly from Archangel Michael. Refusal is akin to treason.”

Josette stood her ground in front of me.

“Josette, don’t,” I said. “You already got in trouble for me once. I don’t want you to sacrifice your faith for me again.”

“You speak as if my faith is something I can lose or give up,” Josette said, her voice rising. “Do not be concerned. I know your cause is just. The Lord has affirmed it in his mercy.” She stepped forward, locking eyes with the angels. “Be careful with your next decision, brothers. You are being led down a path that ends in treachery and a fall from grace. I would not like to see that happen.”

“The decision is not ours to make, sister. It is our Master’s, and he has already decided. The Lord cannot punish us for sending him back where he belongs.”

“How about for stealing?” I asked. “The shards are mine.”

“The shards belong to the seraphim.”

“They were lost. I recovered them. Finders, keepers.”

“That is absurd.”

“Whatever. You still aren’t getting them.”

The angels started their approach. They had sticks that were similar to Josette’s, only they were metal and etched with runes. I assumed it was their version of non-lethal control.

“I won’t allow you to touch him, or take the shards,” Josette said.

“Then you will be disobeying our Lord and Master. You will

fall."

"Will I? Let us see."

She rushed them, bringing her sticks to hand as she did. I stepped forward behind her, trying to think of something I could do or say that would stop her. I didn't want her to fall. I didn't want to cause a fight in Heaven.

She reached the angels, going for the one on the left first, attacking him with a quick series of strikes that he used his arms to block. The one on the right tried to grab her, but she slipped away from his grip, cracking one of the sticks hard on his wrist. His hand dropped numbly as she passed through to the second row.

She stood in the center of them in a ready posture, sticks out beside her, legs low and balanced. More importantly, she hadn't fallen.

"My cause is just," she said.

"Perhaps you believe it to be. That may absolve you to our Lord, but it does not make it so."

They went after her, coming at her in unison. Their metal sticks bounced off her wooden ones, her arms moving in a quick rhythm, her body held planted by her legs. She writhed and undulated around the attacks, sneaking in an occasional strike to the chest or hand that would leave the angels in limited pain. If a disabling blow was what she was after, it was going to take her a while to get it.

Or at least, I thought it was. Then she leaped out from the center of the square, getting behind one of the seraphs and hitting him solidly on the side of the head. The stick made a sharp crack against his skull, and he dropped to the floor.

The other angels moved in, eager to stop her assault. She fell back on defense, deflecting their strikes and making efforts to land her own. They were more wary of her now, and more focused on defending themselves.

"Okay, I've had enough," I said, gathering my power. I wasn't going to sit on the sidelines and let her do everything for me.

Alfred put his hand on my shoulder. "Wait," he said. "I will handle this. Using your power here and now will hurt your case."

The older angel moved forward. Unlike Josette, there was no beauty to his approach, no artistry. He grabbed the first of Raguel's cronies by the back of the neck, holding him and punching him hard enough to knock him out with one blow. He dropped the unconscious seraph and turned to the one next to him, raising an

arm to block a blow from a metal stick. His wrist shattered at the force, but he didn't react, using his other hand to shove the angel against the wall. Then he reached out and took one of Josette's suddenly offered sticks, smacking his opponent hard enough to knock him out.

Suddenly outnumbered, the fourth seraph dropped his sticks and raised his hands in submission.

"The time for change is coming, Josette," the angel said. "Be a part of it, or be left behind."

"It is not for you, Raguel, or Michael to determine the pace of change. Only He may make that decision. Right now, He supports the Diuscrucis." Josette raised her stick. "I can't have you running to Raguel ahead of us."

The seraph spread his hands and exposed his temple. Josette hit him, knocking him out.

"That should keep them for a few hours," she said, leaning down beside her sister and releasing them from their bonds. "Fight with me, sisters. The Lords is on Landon's side in this matter."

"Now what?" I asked. I couldn't quite get used to the idea that God agreed with what I was doing. I wasn't going to argue the point either.

"We have no choice. We have to go to the Council building and free Uriel."

"How are we going to sneak past Raguel and Michael?" Obi asked.

"We aren't," Josette replied. "Mother Hahn will handle the diversion."

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The Council building was the tallest skyscraper in the city, visible from almost everywhere. According to Josette, the Archangels occupied the highest floors, ostensibly to be the closest to God. In reality, the hierarchical nature was obvious, and in my opinion in direct contention with the concept of humility.

"The only one of us who is without flaw is God," Josette said in response to that observation.

According to Dante, even God had his imperfections. That may or may not have been true, and at the moment I wasn't interested in a theological argument. I just wanted to get Uriel to put the sword back together. We had already been in Heaven for three hours, which was more than enough time for Sarah to put the hurt on any number of demons.

Getting to the building was relatively easy. With Raguel's hench-angels disabled, we were able to take the backstreets right up to the building itself without being noticed. Really, the Archangel wasn't even trying to catch us on the way in. We had to come to him if we wanted Uriel, and I didn't exactly have a lot of other options.

“So, tell me more about this diversion,” I said as we stood across the street from the building, staring up at its western wall of glass.

“Mother Hahn requested an audience with Archangel Michael,” Josette said. “When Michael refused, she took her case to Raphael. He and Mother Hahn have a long history of friendship, and he agreed to go to Michael at her bequest. When I signal her, she will send Raphael to Michael, while she takes up her argument with Raguel. With them both distracted, we will have an opportunity to reach Uriel.”

“You know where they’re keeping him?” I asked.

“The main conference room at the top of the tower,” she replied. “It is the only place. They cannot keep him prisoner, they can only stall him with questions and matters of affairs. I imagine he may understand what they are doing, but then again, he might not want to help you anyway.”

“So we could go and rescue him, and he’ll still say no?”

“I wouldn’t call it a rescue. More appropriately, we will be the ones who may be taking him against his will.”

“But he’s an Archangel, right? He’s got power of his own.”

“Yes. It is power he has sworn not to use again in conflict.”

“Okay. How do we get up there?”

“Really, Landon? I am an angel.”

I wondered again if her clothes were real or of my own mental design. It was probably better not to know.

“In that case, send the signal. We’re-”

I stopped speaking as the silence around us was broken by the sound of shattering glass. I looked back at the tower just in time to see a body plummeting from the top. It fell halfway before turning to dust, the momentum spreading it wide and casting it down like confetti.

“Mother Hahn,” Josette said, her face contorted in shock.

“Who?”

“Raguel. It must be.”

“But he has to fall for that.”

“Perhaps. He is an Archangel. He cannot be cast down so easily. There is no time for a diversion. If he is ready to kill for this, Uriel is not safe.”

She circled behind me, her hands coming up beneath my arms. I was in the air before I could protest, being carried up toward the window.

“Oh, crap,” Obi said beside me, dangling from Alfred’s grip. “Did I mention I hate heights?”

We sped toward the clearly broken window at the same time a dozen seraphim appeared on the edge of the building and leaped off, swords appearing in their hands as they dove toward us.

“We’re too late,” Josette said. “Raguel has started the war. He is afraid of you, Landon. Give him a reason to be.”

Her arms flexed, and she tossed me forward, releasing me from her grip. I didn’t look back to see what happened to her or her sisters. I reached out with my power, grabbing the edge of the window and pulling myself toward it, using it like a slingshot. I launched forward in a rush, avoiding the oncoming angels. They spread their wings to slow themselves, taking ineffective cuts at me as I rocketed past, and then turning to give chase.

Then I was shooting through the window and into the building. I threw my power out again, pushing against it to slow my entrance, landing almost gracefully a few feet inside of the edge.

Archangel Raguel was standing beside a large, natural wood table. Another angel was sitting beside him, watching with resigned eyes. Uriel, I presumed.

More importantly, Raguel was still white and pure as snow. He hadn’t fallen.

What the hell was going on?

A soft breeze at my back, and then Obi was beside me, dropped in the room by the passing Alfred. We stood side by side, in direct confrontation with the Archangel.

“Diuscrucis,” he said, smiling. “Did you see that?”

“You killed Mother Hahn.”

“I did more than that. I proved what we have long suspected but were afraid to verify.”

“Which is?”

“God has abandoned Heaven.”

I froze, not sure what to think of that. Was it true? How could it be? According to Josette, He hadn’t abandoned me.

“I don’t believe it,” I said.

“The proof is clear,” Raguel said. “I killed the Mother, and yet I am still clean. God did not see my betrayal. He does nothing to stop our rebellion.”

“How do you possibly justify murder?” I asked. “It’s a big leap from praying for change.”

“You have left me no choice. One thousand followers died tonight, Diuscrucis. He allowed it to happen. He would allow all of us to perish rather than intervene, and at the same time forbid us from seeking rightful vengeance. The price of a few seraphim is a small one to pay to save the rest of Heaven and humankind.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“My mind is clear, as is my conscience. I am doing what needs to be done to stop the true diuscrucis, to stop the demons, and to stop you. If God is present, he agrees with what I am doing. If he isn’t, it does not matter. Our seraphim will wrest control of Heaven from the traditionalists who keep our hands tied while our brothers and sisters die. What kind of Father allows that, anyway?”

I looked over at Uriel. He seemed uninterested in anything Raguel was saying. He didn’t look at me either, staring into space as though his mind wasn’t even there.

“Do you think he can help you, Diuscrucis?” Raguel said. “He’s barely present. He can’t handle violence. He can’t handle conflict. The first war destroyed him, and no amount of time can fix it.”

“I’m taking him anyway,” I said.

“No, you are not.”

I glanced over at Obi, who took a few steps away from me. He knew what came next.

Boss battle. There was no way out of it.

Damn.

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“Obi, see if you can do something with Uriel,” I said, keeping my eyes on Raguel.

“Touch him and perish mortal,” Raguel said.

“I don’t think so,” I replied.

I threw my power out at the Archangel, catching him off-guard. My energy slammed into him, throwing him across the room. He hit the wall and bounced off, landing on his feet, a pair of massive wings spreading out behind him.

“I’m thousands of years old, Diuscrucis,” Raguel said. “I am one of His first creations. I fought Lucifer in the first war.”

“And now you’re turning into the spitting image. Congratulations.”

“You think you know. The truth is that you know nothing.” A sword appeared in his hand, six feet long and glowing with angelic fire. “My heart is pure. This revolution is a long time coming. We shouldn’t have to sit idle while our family dies. We shouldn’t have to follow an absent Father.”

I could see his eyes welling up as he spoke, and I realized I had

misjudged him. He wasn't evil after all. He truly cared about the Touched who had died, and all of the other seraphim the demons had been able to kill because of God's rules. He didn't want to go against Him for power. He was only what he was made to be. He was out for justice and vengeance.

It didn't matter. It was either him or me, and it wasn't going to be me.

He charged me, using his wings to propel himself forward with greater speed. I pushed my power off the wall, throwing myself sideways and away from him, pushing off the opposite wall to send myself back. I gathered my power internally, feeding strength to my body and throwing a hard right cross that caught him in the jaw. The force sent him into the stone, cracking it with his body and leaving him stunned.

"Uriel," I heard Obi said. "Nice to meet you, sir. What do you say we get out of here?"

I glanced over at the seraph. He was ignoring Obi, still staring straight ahead.

Raguel was back in business, and he rushed me again, his sword whistling at me with impossible speed. I threw my power up ahead of it, creating a shield that it sank into, stopping only inches from my face. I used the power like hands, turning the blade, wrenching it from him and throwing it out the window.

He smiled at the maneuver, clearly impressed.

The sword reappeared in his hand.

"That's not fair," I said as he came at me a third time.

He was in close, and his sword was a blur as he struck at me, over and over again. I kept my power moving, twirling it around me like a ribbon dancer, using it to deflect blow after blow while backing away. I needed an opening to hit him again, and he wasn't going to give it to me.

I saw motion near the window, and both Josette and Alfred landed on the precipice behind Raguel. They were in good shape, slightly rumpled but otherwise unharmed. It seemed the angels defending Heaven had nothing on the ones who had been on Earth.

What about Archangels?

"Raguel," Josette said. "Stop this madness."

The Archangel didn't stop. He continued striking, pummeling my shields with his blade, his eyes streaming tears the entire time. If he hadn't been trying so hard to kill me, I might have pitied him.

“Uriel,” Obi said. “Come on, sir. The angels are about to tear one another apart, and you’re the only one who can stop it.”

“The only one,” the Archangel said softly in response. “Always the only one.”

I got the opening I was looking for a moment later. I focused my power, slamming it as hard as I could into Raguel’s gut. The blow sent him out and up, and he crashed into the ceiling and fell to the floor, one of his wings bent at an odd angle as he cried out.

“Stay down,” Alfred said, putting his sword to the Archangel’s neck.

Raguel looked up at me. I knew that look.

“Alfred,” I said, trying to warn the angel.

Too late. Raguel grabbed the seraph’s sword by the blade, yanking it from his hand. He spun to his feet, flipping the sword as he did, coming around and driving it through the elder angel’s neck. It slid off his body and tumbled to the floor.

“No!” Raguel screamed. “No!”

He dropped the sword. His own blade vanished. His wings began to turn color, starting at the outer edges and working their way in. He had struck Alfred down in anger. There was nothing just about it.

He was falling.

“You lied to me,” Raguel shouted. “You promised me I was one of your beloved. That I would always be your child.”

His hands were curling into claws. He was changing in a way I had never seen before.

“That doesn’t look good,” I said.

“You don’t know the history of the first war,” Josette replied. “We have to go. Now.”

“Uriel, you need to get up,” Obi said. “Look what’s happening to him.”

“Happening?” Uriel said. His eyes flicked over to Raguel. He didn’t seem impressed.

The former Archangel’s bare chest heaved as he finished his fall. He had grown at least four feet, his already strong body expanding and growing stronger, his wings becoming more leathered and worn. His fingers and feet were claws, his teeth grown to fangs.

“What the heck?” I said.

“Ever since Lucifer fell, this is what happens when an Archangel falls,” Josette said.

“Does it happen often?”

“No. This is only the third time. Michael and Raphael were forced to destroy Remiel.”

Raguel regarded us with cold, red eyes. “This is not justice,” he growled.

“God hasn’t abandoned Heaven,” I said. “He’s still watching over you. I tried to warn you.”

“This is not justice,” he repeated, his lip curling in anger. “I trusted in You. I followed You. All I desired was to protect the family You created. Why have You done this to me?”

“You did it to yourself,” Josette said. “Your motivations were pure, but your heart wasn’t. You wanted the power of the sword more than you wanted to defend your brothers and sisters.”

“That isn’t true,” Raguel said, growing angry. “That isn’t true.”

“Uh, Josette,” I said.

“And now the lies begin,” she said. “There is no sense in being honest, is there, Raguel? Not when you have already fallen.”

“Lies?” the fallen archangel screamed. “Lies?” He looked at me. “This is your fault, Diuscrucis. Not my fault.”

He pounced toward me, raking his claws at my face. He was fast. So fast. I wasn’t expecting that. I couldn’t get my power up in time.

His hand stopped anyway, right before it reached my cheek. I could smell the sulfur against the flesh and feel the ancient heat of it.

Uriel was standing, his hand out, holding Raguel with a power I didn’t know he had.

“The taint of your sin confuses you, brother,” Uriel said. “Do not force me to repeat history. There is no good end for any of us if I do.”

Raguel lowered his hand and backed away from me.

“Go down to where you belong,” Uriel said. “Join him in the Pit. You’ve been seduced by power. Overcome by temptation. It is a sad day in Heaven, Raguel.”

Raguel was still, his head bowed. He raised it a moment later, looking at Uriel. “I won’t go. He betrayed me. He lied to me. To all of us. He doesn’t care if we die. He doesn’t care if we fall. He puts His faith in this one.” He pointed at me. “He gives him His favor. He is no angel. He is half-demon. Half-evil.”

“Raguel,” Uriel said. “I’m warning you.”

“No,” Raguel screamed. Then he lunged at Uriel.

The Archangel raised his hand again, but it did no good. Raguel continued toward him, hands wide to cut him in half.

“Landon,” Josette said.

I threw my power out in a taut, thin line.

Raguel tripped over it, catching it with his claw and stumbling forward.

Uriel stepped aside, and then reached out and grabbed Obi by the arm.

“We must go,” the Archangel said, pulling him to the window and leaping out.

“Landon,” Josette said again.

I nodded, running to the window and jumping out, letting myself begin to fall. She caught me a moment later, holding me tight to her chest. A massive shout sounded behind us, a demonic roar of anger and pain.

“What’s going to happen now?” I asked.

“His followers will join him. They will fall for him if we don’t stop it. Heaven will turn black as chaos consumes it.”

“How do we stop it?”

Josette pointed at Uriel, carrying Obi ahead of us. We were almost clear of the city, making a beeline for his home.

“Uriel will remake the sword. You will be the Lord’s champion.”

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26

We landed just outside the gate to Uriel's home. I looked back and could see Raguel already behind us, more angels joining him as he headed our way. There were a lot of them. Too many. I felt a pang of sadness. They had all been granted a special place in Heaven, and it wasn't good enough for them.

"Get inside," Uriel said. He looked different now. Younger and more alive.

We hurried in past the gate. Uriel swung it closed, holding his hand against it and praying. "Lord, protect me as you have in the past. Grant me your wisdom, that I may do as You will."

The gate began to glow, the millions of runes lighting up along the perimeter. The light extended from the metal upward, into the sky as far as I could see.

Raguel reached us a few seconds later, landing in front of the gate, two hundred angels behind him. They wouldn't fall just for joining him. Not until they attacked their own.

"Uriel," Raguel said. "I will kill you."

"You can't touch me," Uriel replied. "Please, my friends, come

inside."

He turned his back on Raguel, entering the house.

"I will kill you," Raguel shouted, stepping forward and slamming his fist against the gate. He fell back in a blue flash, repelled by the power of the runes. "I will kill you as well, Diuscrucis. His power cannot hold forever. Even during the first war, he needed Raphael to protect him."

"Landon, let's go," Josette said, taking my hand. I followed her into the house, as Raguel threw himself against the barrier again.

"He's right, isn't he?" I said. "The barrier won't hold."

"It will hold long enough," Uriel said. "You have the shards?"

I took them from my pocket. The Archangel seemed to freeze again when he saw them, his eyes momentarily growing distant. Then he reached out and took them.

"It will take me some time to reforge the blade."

"What do we do in the meantime?" Obi asked.

"Pray."

Then he vanished, headed toward the forge.

I turned to Josette. "Where is Raphael in all of this?"

"If I had to guess, Michael is delaying him. The First Archangel will not involve himself directly and risk the same fate as Raguel. Instead, he will allow God to decide the matter."

"How can Michael be against God and with God at the same time?"

"He is not against God. He is never against God. That does not mean he agrees with all of His rules and laws and is an unquestioning follower. God does not ask us not to question. He asks us to be pure in our motives. In our hearts and in our souls. As you are. That is why you are His champion."

"Yeah, about that. I don't see how I can be his chosen one, or whatever you want to call it. I'm not a good guy. I'm not fighting for Heaven, and I don't want Him to win."

Josette smiled, looking at me like I was a child. I had always hated when she did that. I didn't realize how much I missed it until now.

"Do you think that God only cares about winning the war against the demons? Perhaps he doesn't care about winning that war at all. Perhaps, there is only one soul He is trying to save right now."

I crinkled my eyebrows. "Mine?"

She shrugged. “The point is, you are trying to guess the will of God. It is impossible to guess. All that we know, all that we can work from, is what we have in front of us. You want to save humankind, the Divine, and Sarah. You want to take in a demon, fall in love with her, and make her good.”

“You know about Alyx?”

“I told you, Landon, we are bonded from our time together. Just like you were to Abaddon.”

“I never felt you.”

“Didn’t you?”

I stopped to consider it. Maybe I had, but never realized it.

“I’m not making her good,” I said. “She’s making herself good. She’s trying to be more than she has known. More than Satan made her to be. It isn’t always easy.”

“Temptations are everywhere. Once, you may have given in to them. But you have learned. So has she.”

“I can’t be all good. Not now. Not ever. I’m the Diuscrucis. My job is to keep the balance.”

“So you say.”

“What does that mean?”

She gave me the look a second time. I could feel my face flush.

“I can’t tell you everything, Landon. Some things, you must learn for yourself.”

“Right. Fine.” I stepped toward her. “I missed you.”

She stepped toward me, reaching up and putting her arms around me. We held one another for a long moment.

“I missed you, too,” she said.

“Aww,” Obi said beside us. “You two were always so great together.”

We broke the embrace, looking at him.

“In a platonic way,” he said. “Like brother and sister. Seriously.” He smiled.

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

“Me? I’m just fine. I mean, I’m in Heaven, and still stuck in the middle of a war, but other than that, I’m good.”

“You’ll be rewarded for your loyalty,” Josette said.

“Yeah.” He looked up at the ceiling. “I guess I don’t need to do that here.” He laughed. “I better.”

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27

I lost track of time, sitting in Uriel's house with Obi and Josette, spending the hours talking about everything. It felt like old times, back when we were all together and things were almost right with the world. Back before the Beast seduced Sarah, and it all began to fall apart.

I told them things I had never spoken about before. I told them of my experiences in the Box, and more specifically my experiences after I got out. I told them of Charis and Clara, and how hard I tried to convince myself to stay away from the fight, to ignore the call to return as the champion of humankind only to find myself neck deep and hurting once more.

Josette was as pragmatic, devout, and wonderful as always. Obi showed a lot of empathy for my plight, even if he didn't completely understand it.

To say the experience was cathartic would be an understatement. It healed me in a way I didn't know I needed to be healed. It helped me to prepare for what I knew was going to come. There was nothing about the future that would be easy, and nothing

was going to come up roses.

But at least I knew I wasn't alone.

I felt the clenching in my gut and the shift in the balance when the demons were killed, the scales tilting back towards even. It wasn't as hard to take as the death of the Touched had been, except for the fact that I knew it made Sarah a loose cannon once more, able to target either side with impunity. I realized that was how I had made the angels and demons feel. They never knew which side I was fighting for, and it drove a fear into them that nothing else could. I felt that same fear now.

I went outside to check on Raguel from time to time. He snarled at me every time he saw me, his anger at God growing to envelop an anger at everything. His words became less coherent, his thoughts a jumbled, chaotic mess. His followers seemed to be feeding off the strife, growing more restless. Some attacked the gates and wound up falling. In the beginning, their fate seemed to bother the former Archangel. Later, he seemed to be trying to entice them to attack and to join him in his darkness.

The worst part was that it was becoming more and more obvious that Uriel's protections were failing. The blue glow was less intense, the metals bars becoming bent and worn. If I had to guess, I would say two or three days had passed, and still, there was no word from the Archangel. He remained locked away in the forge, and while we could hear the clang of his hammer on the metal, we had no idea how much progress he was making, or when he would be done.

He had claimed the protections would hold long enough.

I could only hope he was right.

It bothered me that Raphael wasn't going to help us. It bothered me that none of the other angels or archangels were willing to step in. Or even Jesus for that matter, wherever that guy was hiding out. Josette told me that it wasn't safe for them and that their participation wouldn't change the will of God anyway. This was my moment, my destiny. Whatever. I still didn't believe in destiny, and as far as I was concerned, they were all selfish and useless. When I thought about it more, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't much different. All sentient things were selfish to an extent, either except for God or including Him. I couldn't convince myself which it was, and I wasn't going to push that one on Josette.

It was the fifth day, or maybe the sixth, when Uriel finally emerged from the forge into the main part of the house where we

had made ourselves comfortable. There was nothing flashy or grand about his entrance. He walked out, bare-chested, dirty, and sweaty, holding the blade wrapped in an oiled cloth. We all stood as he did, and he approached me with a stoic, intense face, turning the weapon over in his hands and extending the hilt.

I was expecting something ornate. It wasn't that at all. It was a simple wooden handle, wrapped in leather to make it easier to grip. There was a single rune etched onto the pommel.

"That is my Mark," he said to me. "It connects me to the blade. I will feel the loss of every soul that you destroy with it."

The statement made me understand his guilt and his sadness. It also made the responsibility of its use crystal clear.

"I understand," I said.

"I know," he replied.

I took the grip, and he pulled the cloth away. For all the handle wasn't, the blade itself was. Perfectly formed and etched with runes, glowing softly with a power I had never felt before. It was awe-inspiring to look at, and frightening to hold.

"Use this tool in the name of the Lord, and you will never falter," he said.

"Amen," Josette added.

I lifted the blade, feeling the perfect balance. He handed me a simple sheath, and I slid the weapon into it.

Then Uriel turned to Obi.

"I have done as you asked," Uriel said, reaching into the pocket of his apron and removing a pair of metal gauntlets.

Obi's eyes grew wide at the sight of them, and he reached out and took them from the Archangel. "Wow."

"What is that?" I asked.

He showed me the gauntlets. The runes from the Fist of God's bolts were obvious on the lines of metal that rest across the knuckles.

"I told you I had an idea for what to do with them," Obi said. "My man Uriel hooked me up."

"They won't harm angels," Uriel said. He smiled. "Demons are another story."

An echoing groan from the front of the house stole the moment.

"The fortifications are breaking down," the Archangel said.

"Just like you knew they would?" I asked.

He shrugged. "You can't hide in here forever, Diuscrucis. Now,

go and save the world. You can start with Raguel."

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28

It was something right out of Western. The White Hats, which oddly enough included me, stepping out of the saloon and into the street just as the Black Hats, also strangely enough featuring a former Archangel, finally broke down the gates preventing them from reaching us.

They surged forward with a transformed Raguel at their head, two hundred strong. Nearly a quarter of them had already fallen, and by the din raised by the rest, they too were in danger of taking that final step over to the dark side.

“You’re too late,” I said, withdrawing Uriel’s blade from its sheath. The glow of it bothered the fallen angels, causing them to shrink back slightly.

“I’m right on time,” Raguel hissed.

He looked even less humanoid than the last time I had checked the perimeter, his legs merged into a single thick tail, his body continuing to grow. He was nearly twenty feet tall and all muscle, a frightening beast of a demon whose anger at God continued to twist and distort him.

“Give me the sword,” he demanded. “And I will allow you to return to your world.”

“It wasn’t going to happen when you still had some good in you,” I replied. “Now that you’re a raving snake monster? Not a chance in Heaven.”

He hissed again in anger. It was incredible how he had changed, and how his followers continued to support him even as he devolved into something so clearly evil.

“Then I will destroy you,” he said.

I lowered the sword to my side, holding it like a gunslinger would hold his piece.

“Go ahead and try,” I replied.

He shot forward before I finished speaking, his body moving so quick he nearly had me before I could react. I gathered my power, pushing myself back away from him as Obi and Josette spread to either side. The fallen angels shouted and hissed in their bloodlust, while the other angels stood by.

“Good try,” I said, pushing my power into my limbs, giving myself the strength and speed I would need to match the fallen Archangel. Raguel burst forward again, swiping at me with large claws, snapping at me with sharp teeth. I sidestepped his attack, countering with one of my own. He bent back, avoiding it, at the same time his tail came around to sweep my legs.

I pushed off, jumping over them and toward the demon’s face. I tried to ram the sword into his head, but he ducked aside, and then lashed out with a claw. It caught me on the side, making a light cut and throwing me into the throng.

Fallen angels reached for me, trying to hold me for their Master. I swung the blade out around me, catching one of them in the chest. I could feel the power run up the blade, a tingling pain that changed into a burning sensation as it made its way into my soul. I grunted as a result, surprised that it hurt as much as it did.

Then I was launching away from the demons, rocketing back toward Raguel. I caught a glimpse of Obi and Josette as I did, wading into the melee and clearing the field of the fallen. Obi’s gauntlets hit the demons in flashes of blue light, pulling them easily off their feet and leaving them steaming with sulfur.

Raguel faced me, his hands shifting to block my incoming attack. I reached out with my power, pulling myself sideways as I neared him, throwing my sword arm out and slicing across his

outstretched hand. A neat line opened up beneath it, and my body writhed as some of the former Archangel's power was absorbed. I landed on the ground in a ball, struggling to deal with the input. Had Uriel messed something up, or was it supposed to feel like that?

Either way, I barely had time to recover before Raguel was on me, his tail whipping out and trying to wrap around me. I rolled away on the ground before pulling myself to my feet and facing off with him once more.

He had shrunk at least a foot after my first attack, the reduction in his power causing a reduction in size. As my pain vanished, I could feel the increase in my overall strength, and I pushed it through me, bunching myself and launching toward the demon again.

He hissed as I launched a series of quick strikes, managing to duck back from them as I moved in, keeping himself out of range. He tried to get his tail in play again to knock me down, forcing me to pause the attack to avoid it and getting himself back on the offensive as I did. I barely got the blade up in time to deflect one set of claws, and then had to throw myself aside to keep from being bitten. I rolled to my feet, taking only a moment before deciding to go for the finish.

I gathered myself and sprang at him again, launching myself into the air toward his head. He was anticipating the move, since it was the third time I had done it, and he jerked aside accordingly.

Only I was anticipating his reaction, and I had already released Uriel's blade, using my power to throw it out to the right, directly into the space he was now occupying. I could see his eyes grow as he caught sight of the sword. Then it was sticking into one of those eyes, burying itself all the way to the hilt.

I landed unarmed on the other side of Raguel, turning and facing him. His body was shrinking, the sword crackling with his power. Whoever touched the hilt next would be able to claim it as their own.

One of the fallen angels saw it and turned to reach for it. Obi grabbed him a moment later, lifting him easily with the gauntlets and throwing him aside.

"I love these things," he said.

I moved toward Raguel. His body was almost back to human size, the sword sticking absurdly from his head. It clattered to the

ground a few seconds later as the body vanished into ash.

I stood over it, looking down. I knew how much it was going to hurt to lift it and claim the power. It caused me to hesitate, and maybe that was the point. It shouldn't be easy or painless to destroy other souls. It should hurt. It should force you to think before you did it.

I reached for it slowly, trying to prepare myself for the hurt to come. I didn't want this, but I needed it. There was no other way to save human or Divine from what would otherwise come. There was no other way to match Sarah, whether I took her life or somehow saved it.

I put my hand on the hilt. The sigil flared, and the pain coursed through me. So did the power. I felt it acutely like I was winding a massive ball and had just added a few more layers.

Then it was done. I stood in the center of over one hundred angels, all of whom seemed to be breaking free of a spell. They stared at me in reverent silence, as though I was their savior and not the killer of their idol.

"Well done, my friend," Josette said, coming to stand beside me.

"Well done, indeed," Uriel said, approaching from the entrance to his home.

"Does that mean the war in Heaven is over?" I asked.

"Only time will tell us that, I'm afraid," Uriel replied. "But it is a good sign, a clear signal that God supports the Diuscrucis, and continues to watch over us and uphold His laws."

"You should have told me it was going to hurt," I said.

"You should have expected it," Uriel replied.

I nodded somberly. He was right.

"We need to return to the mortal realm," I said. "We seem to have lost our ride."

I was looking at Josette when I said it. Of course, I wanted her to come back with us.

"I'm sorry, Landon," she said. "I cannot. My vow is to remain with the Sisterhood."

"I understand," I replied. "Will I ever see you again?"

"I don't know. That depends on you, I suppose."

I knew what she meant. I nodded and then embraced her.

"I love you," I said, feeling my eyes moistening once more.

"I love you, too," she replied.

"If I can save Sarah, I will."

“I know.”

“I will return you to your realm,” Uriel said. “Is there anywhere in particular you would like to go?”

“Mexico,” I said. “Home.”

“Think of it, and it will be so.”

He started reaching out, one hand for me and one for Obi.

“Goodbye, Josette,” I said.

“Goodbye, Landon,” she replied.

Then Uriel touched me, and I was home.

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29

“Landon,” Alichino said as Obi and I made our way into the control room of the underground lair. “Where have you been?”

The room was filled with former slaves of Espanto, Turned men and women who had chosen to remain with Alyx when she took control of the place. They monitored different data sources, tapping into phone calls, hacking computer systems, and otherwise working almost nonstop to keep the information flowing.

That was the true currency for the Divine on Earth. The difference between being master or slave. How much more you knew than anyone else, and what you could do with that knowledge. Espanto had gained the position he did more because of his ability to capture and parse information than anything else.

Of course, having Alyx to do his dirty work hadn’t hurt.

“Heaven,” I replied. “Have you heard from Dante recently?”

The demon ignored the first part as if I went to Heaven every day. “Yeah, he’s been stopping by every few hours to see if you’re back. I forgot where you told me you went last time I talked to you, but he knew. He made me write it all down.” He took a piece of

paper from his pocket and scanned it. “Oh yeah, now I remember. He sent you to find a way to Heaven. I guess you did?”

“I did.”

“He’ll be happy to hear that. We’ve got trouble, Landon. Big trouble.”

I already knew that. Just because I had the sword didn’t mean we were on the verge of victory. Far from it.

“Sarah?”

“Among other things.”

“I felt the balance shift.”

“Yeah. You need to see this.”

He wandered over to one of the workstations. The Turned woman in front of it swiveled her chair to face us. She was young and attractive. All of Espanto’s former servants were.

“Show him what you showed me,” the demon said.

“Yes, my Lord,” the woman said.

I glared at Alichino, whose leathery snout flushed. “I didn’t tell her to call me that,” he complained. “Did I?”

“You suggested that when Mistress Alyx is not present, we should refer to you as-”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, does it?” Alichino said, interrupting nervously.

I continued staring at him. All of the Turned here had been abused by Espanto in one way or another, and subservient monikers weren’t going to help them get past it. Alichino could be helpful most of the time, but he was still a demon.

“Fine,” he said. “I just wanted to know what it was like for someone to call me Master.”

“Now you know,” I said. “If I hear someone call you that again-”

“Okay, okay. I get it. No need to get huffy about it.” He pointed at the screen. “Let’s stay focused, huh?”

I looked over at the screen. There were two satellite images displaying on it, side by side. The left side showed what looked like an old military bunker somewhere in the middle of a forest. The right side showed the same bunker, but the forest looked as if it had been burned away from it.

“I take it that isn’t from a forest fire?”

“It’s what’s left of a demon army,” he said. “That’s why the area around the bunker is toast, and the rest of it is intact.”

“Sarah?”

“Yeah. We got the report over the wire. The bunker belonged to a Fiend Warlord in Somalia. He had a whole militia of Turned soldiers hiding out there, along with a Hell rift that he could use to ferry demons up. He was about to launch an assault on a rival warlord. That never happened.”

“Sarah killed them all on her own?” Obi asked.

“No, she wasn’t alone. A fallen angel was with her. One with a sword for a hand.”

“Adam. He’s helping her kill angels and demons?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think he knows what she did to the angels. I think I may have been wrong about him. Or mostly wrong. He hates me, sure, but maybe he still loves God despite his fall. Look at what happened to Raguel. His uncontrolled anger turned him into a monster. That hasn’t happened to Adam. Plus, he was in contact with that blue-eyed angel from the Mass, and she saved Alfred from Sarah, and Sarah killed her. Not the kind of actions you would expect from someone who was in on it.”

“True,” Obi said. “So Adam is fallen, but he’s helping Sarah kill demons. Do you think she told him she’s fighting for the good guys? I don’t see how he would buy that?”

“Help me kill demons, and maybe God will change his mind and reinstate you,” I said. “If he were desperate enough, I could see how that might work.”

“I just can’t believe Sarah is capable of all of this,” Obi said. “I never knew she was hurting so bad.”

“Me neither, and that’s my failure. My cross to bear. We have to take it where we are right now. The rest of it won’t matter until we catch up to her.” I looked at the satellite imagery again. “I felt the balance adjust. How many demons?”

“Three thousand?” Alichino guessed. “Give or take.”

“What about the Turned? I don’t see any bodies.”

“I think they’re all inside.”

“Any ripple effect?”

“Of course,” Alichino said. “The rival Warlord has claimed the territory. Other factions are gearing up to challenge. A lot more people are going to die because of this.”

I shook my head, frustrated. “More innocent people caught up in the Divine war games. And we don’t know where Sarah is, or what she’s going to do next. Will she go after another group of Turned? Will she hit a seraph Sanctuary? Or will she go for more demons?”

“We need to find her before she can do either,” Obi said.

“A good thought, but I don’t know how we can,” I replied.

“I’ll see if I can dig anything else up. Maybe there’s another clue on SamChan.”

“Okay. Allie, can you get Obi set up with a workstation and access to everything?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“What are you going to do?” Obi asked.

“Wait for Dante. I need to talk to him. After that?” I held up Uriel’s sword. “Start killing Divine.”

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Not that I was eager to kill Divine.

For one thing, I didn't enjoy destroying anything. Ending Raguel was its own bitter pill. The Archangel had been a loyal servant of God for eons, and his fall had happened so fast and been so complete. In my mind, I had still killed an angel, not a demon. In my mind, his end was more directly my fault than any other. He had turned because I had failed.

Maybe that wasn't true, but it was hitting my conscience regardless. The thought of going out there and finding Divine to slaughter to increase my own power? That was like asking a nun for sex. I didn't want more power; I wanted less. Especially with the latest understanding that my very existence was part of the growing instability in our corner of the universe.

And then there was the fact that whatever I did, Sarah was going to do the opposite. If I killed demons, she would go after angels. The more power I absorbed, the more she would remove from the other end. She was still part-mortal, but she could feel the balance as well as I could. Probably better. She would know what I

was doing. She would understand that part of my plan. Would she try to stop me, or was there a part of her that wanted me to win?

Whichever way it went, I needed to be ready. I couldn't rush in and start claiming power without giving real consideration to whose power I was taking. Just like wiping a fiend's zone of control away in Somalia was going to cause a wider outbreak of violence, taking out the wrong Divine could create ripples that only added to the chaos.

It was a level of finesse that I wasn't really prepared for. One that I wasn't sure I was even capable of.

Thus, Dante.

I had no idea how long I was going to have to wait for him, and to be honest the waiting sucked. I made my way down to the training area of the facility, where Espanto had taught Alyx to kill more efficiently, more like an assassin than a were. It was a grim place, filled with sharp objects, the walls bloodstained from the targets the demon had placed for his slave. It was an unnerving reminder, but it also gave me a sense of purpose. I wasn't looking to destroy Divine for my sake. I was trying to save everyone else the only way I could.

I practiced with the blade for a while, going through the motions I had learned from Josette, whipping the sword around like a badass ninja. The exertion brought minimal calm to my mind and body, but it did serve to pass the time relatively efficiently. I was in the middle of one of the more difficult seraphim forms when the door to the room opened, and Dante walked in.

I froze mid-sweep, throwing the blade down. It buried itself four inches deep into the foam mat and cement floor below it, sticking straight up like Excalibur. I had already dealt with that blade. Frankly, I was pretty sick of them all.

"Signore," Dante said, smiling. "I see your efforts in Heaven were successful."

"Mixed bag," I replied. "I got the sword, but the seraphim are a mess. There may or may not be an extended conflict continuing up there because of what Sarah is doing down here."

The smile vanished. "A war in Heaven is a problem for all of us."

"I know. I figure the best way to stop it is to take care of things here. I got to see Josette while I was there, so at least something good came out of it."

The smile didn't return. "She is well?"

“As well as can be expected. Of course, she’s worried about Sarah.”

“As are we all. Alichino handed me your message as soon as I arrived. I’m surprised that you wanted my advice.”

“Why wouldn’t I? I thought I could handle things without you. I can’t. I have the sword, and I already absorbed a fallen archangel’s power with it. It isn’t enough. It isn’t close to enough. I need to kill more Divine, and the thought of it is making me sick to my stomach. Worse, I have no idea who to target that won’t cause a major backlash.”

“I understand.” He rubbed at his chin, considering my words. “It would make sense then that we would target the most powerful demons who aren’t in control of large territories of their own.”

“But then Sarah will start attacking the angels again.”

“I know. The problem for you, signore, is that all angels on Earth have the same overall level of Divine power. Some may have slightly less depending on how many they have Touched, but the difference for you will be negligible. Demons, on the other hand, have a massive variability. One which you can exploit.”

“Except the most powerful demons are usually in control of a large number of less powerful demons. Or they spend most of their time in Hell.”

“A difficult position to work around, but not impossible. Archfiends will often summon stronger demons to fight for them when the need arises. We need to create a mapping of this information and make an attempt to predict when and where an inter-demon feud will occur. Then we can intervene.”

“If I remove the strongest player, it will change the outcome of the battle. That could be a problem.”

“Why should it? Does it truly matter who wins or loses if both sides are evil?”

I thought about it for a minute. “Maybe not. Still, we could be waiting days to put something like that together. I need to move on this now before Sarah forces our hand.”

Dante resumed rubbing at his chin. “That is true. This is quite a bind, indeed.”

He began pacing the room, not reacting to the visuals at all. He kept his head down, his hand working on his face.

“You will need to maintain the balance on your own. Attack angels and demons randomly. When Sarah sees there is no order to

it, she will be unable to counter. You may also succeed in slowing her down."

I thought about it for a minute. "Or we might end up pushing things too far if we wind up attacking the same side at the same time. Is that a risk we want to take?"

"It is another option. I will continue to consider."

He paced again, up and down the space a hundred times or more. I stood beside the sword, waiting patiently for him to come up with something. Maybe I could have brainstormed it too, but I knew he would figure something out. He had hundreds of years more experience than me.

He stopped at last, looking up at me, a measure of discomfort on his aged face.

"I can think of another approach, signore, but I'm not sure if it will meet our needs."

"Which is?"

"A son of Lucifer is walking this realm, are they not?"

"You mean Zifah?" I said. I wasn't sure I liked where this was going to go. "Yeah."

"He will be quite powerful in his own right. He also double-crossed you, and his only affiliation is with Gervais." He smiled. "Who is also rather powerful, I might add."

I couldn't argue the logic or the motive. I also couldn't argue that I would love the chance to use those two the way they used me, and to put an end to both of them once and for all.

"A good reason to take them out, and under most circumstances I would agree that it's a pretty solid way to go. There's only one small problem with that."

"The Fist of God."

"Yes. I can't defeat it."

"Are you certain?"

"I'm oh-for-one so far."

"One interaction is a small sample size, signore. Besides, your power has already increased, and we should be able to improve it a little more before you have to confront the Fist or the demons or Sarah. Yes, an idea has come to me. I told you that I could be useful to you, signore. Now is my chance to prove it."

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“It’s not like it’s just magic,” Alichino said, shaking his head. “I mean, I don’t just type ‘Fist of God’ into the computer and a bunch of results come up like this setup is freaking Google.”

I was back in the command center with Obi, Dante, and Alichino. The poet had approached the demon with his idea, which first and foremost consisted of finding out who Gervais and Zifah might have been in contact with over the last few days. Even with the Fist of God, the pair would need allies if they were going to try to get to Sarah, if for no other reason than to distract or delay her.

“You don’t need to find the Fist,” Dante argued. “You need to find out who these two demons might have been in contact with.”

“And how am I supposed to do that? I’ve been trying for weeks and haven’t gotten squat.”

“That was before Sarah started turning things upside down,” I said. “If they’re going to make a move, they’re going to do it soon.”

“I can help you track them down, little guy,” Obi said.

Alichino shot his snout toward Obi. “Little guy? I don’t need your help. This equipment is the latest and greatest, and I’ve

optimized it with some extra data processing algorithms that increase parsing speed by thirty percent."

"So you can just type 'Zifah' into it, and a bunch of results should come up," I suggested.

He turned his stink-eye my way. "Funny, Landon. Really. You should be a comedian. I'm going to have to look through all of the meta-data we've collected from the archfiends around the world. Gervais wouldn't waste his time with anyone too far down the chain. Three, four days should be enough, don't you think?"

"Probably," I said, noticing that Obi had gone back to the workstation the demon had set up for him. "How long do you think this is going to take?"

Alichino shrugged. "Five, six hours at least. I have to cross-reference datasets, reindex the blobs, that sort of thing. I know it seems simple, but really it's-"

"Got it," Obi said. "Phone record from yesterday."

"What?" Alichino said. "How did you find it that fast?"

"Typed 'Fist of Gervais' into the search box," Obi replied.

"You're kidding," I said. That was what Zifah had called it during our little meet.

"Nope. Got a hit right away. Some archfiend in Indonesia named Srizyl had a chat with your friend Zifah about the Fist. Apparently, Gervais is claiming that they can make more of them, and offered her one in exchange for her assistance in capturing Sarah."

"And she believes him?"

"Apparently enough that they've scheduled a demo for later tonight so that they can show off the Fist."

Was this going to be easier than I had thought? "You're kidding."

"Still nope, man."

"Signore," Dante said. "You know what they say about things that appear too good to be true."

"Yeah, I know, and this fits that bill perfectly. The only thing that has me thinking that it might not be a trap is that the call was made before I got back from Heaven with the sword. How can you set someone up for a date and time you can't be sure about?"

"If anyone could do it, Gervais can," Obi said.

"If Gervais didn't want you to know about it, he would have used a messenger," Dante said. "Since he didn't, consider that he does."

“He’s hoping that once I have the sword, I’ll come to him with it. Maybe he already guessed either he or Zifah would be a target. We have to assume he’ll be prepared, whether the meet is specifically designed to lure me in or not. If he could show off the power of the Fist against me, that would be a pretty good sell to get this Srizyl on board.”

“If he even intends to make a deal with her,” Obi said.

“He can’t make a deal,” I replied. “Nobody can recreate the Fist. The archangel who made the original scripture is dead, and there isn’t another like her that can replicate it. Cain may have modified it somewhat, but he’s gone, too.”

“Which only makes this more obviously a trap,” Dante said. “Gervais has taken advantage of you too many times for you to fall for this.”

“I wouldn’t call it falling for. It was your idea to take out whichever archfiends Gervais tried to ally with to build my strength, and we can still do that.”

“While being attacked by the Fist?”

“If that’s what it takes, yes. I can avoid it while I go after Srizyl. Once I have her power, it will even the odds a bit more.”

“Enough to fight it? Enough to kill Zifah?”

I glared at Dante. I was getting frustrated with him. He wanted me to take this approach, and now he was questioning every part of it.

“I need to get a hold of Zifah if I’m going to level up enough to challenge Sarah. If they want me to come to them, then that’s what I’m going to have to do. It’s not like our other ideas were much better.”

“Landon,” Obi said.

“Signore,” Dante said.

As much as I disliked their hesitation, I also understood it. Being forced to put too much faith in Gervais is what had cost me the Fist in the first place. Even so, it had to be done. Again.

The difference? Maybe this time, I could go in a little more prepared. Maybe this time, I could outthink the demon and come out ahead. Gervais would do anything he had to in order to get his hands on the sword. That was something I might be able to use.

With a little help from my friends, of course.

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My friends, and some other people who weren't quite my friends.

Whenever I needed something I didn't have and didn't know where to get, I went to see the Nicht Creidem. In this case, I needed two things from them, neither of which I was certain they could provide, but both of which would prove invaluable to surviving the obvious mess I was going to put myself in the middle of.

As if I wasn't already up to my neck in it.

There was no part of me that really wanted to visit Indonesia and Gervais' apparent efforts to wrap another noose around my throat. There was also no part of me that could accept the alternatives that Dante and I had already discussed. Zifah was the perfect target. I knew it. Dante knew it. Gervais knew it. When Zifah had shown up in France? That was all part of the game. I was sure of that now. They wanted me to know the score. It was a big fat hello, don't forget about me. Come and get it when you think you're ready. I was sure the demons had plenty of tricks up their sleeves.

It meant I needed to gather a few more tricks under mine.

I had Dante poof me back to New York, dropping me in the middle of a dark alley as the sun was setting across the Hudson.

"I'll meet you back here in two hours," I said to him. "Don't be late."

"Of course, signore," he replied. Then he vanished again.

I headed down the alley toward the street. I had switched my dress to include a long vinyl duster, the kind most often seen in science-fiction flicks. It was fitted where it needed to be and loose where it had to be to hide Uriel's sword in close enough proximity that I could grab it and use it should the need arise. Part of me was hoping it would. I would take any added juice I could get. Then again, I didn't want to make a scene.

There were a lot of people on the streets this time of night. It felt good to insert myself into the middle of them, to walk among them as if I were almost normal. Sometimes I really missed being mortal. Missed being ignorant about the war between Heaven and Hell. This was one of those times.

It got me thinking more about my place in the Universe, and about what Sarah had said. I didn't belong here. We didn't belong here. I already knew there was only one ending for me. One way that I could go when this was done. To the stars with Charis and Clara. It didn't frighten me. I knew it was a better end than many experienced. Still, I felt a little cheated. I had never asked to be drawn into this. I had never wanted to die and come back as humankind's champion. I was so young and had gotten so few years.

Boo hoo, lots of people died even younger. I got mad for feeling sorry for myself and stopped that train of thought dead. I was here for a reason, and apparently, God Himself had put His faith in me. That was a scary thought, and at the same time comforting. I wasn't His biggest fan. Before I had died, I had questioned His existence all the time. He was on my side regardless. Who would have thought?

I crossed a few blocks until I reached the outside of the cab terminal. A few yellows were making their way in and out of the facility, and I noticed them noticing me as I reached the front door. All of the drivers here were Nicht, and I knew some of them would recognize that I was out of place as soon as they saw me. I half-expected them to slam on the brakes and do something stupid, but something in their brains told them to stay out of it. I was grateful for that.

“Who the hell are you?” a heavyset, balding man in a greasy wifebeater asked as I entered the garage. He was standing next to a cab that had its hood open, a wrench in his hand.

“I’m looking for Bianca,” I said.

“How do you know Bianca?”

“We’re old friends. My name is-”

“Landon Hamilton,” Bianca said, appearing in a doorway a dozen feet away. “We are not friends.”

I looked over at her and smiled. “You remembered me?”

She held something up, turning it around so I could see it. A still from security camera footage, with my face clearly visible in it.

“I had my people grab this while you were still here the last time. I’ve been carrying it with me since, so I would know you in case you turned up again.”

“Smart,” I said. And resourceful. I was fortunate none of the angels or demons had thought of it.

“For mortals to fight this war, we have to be. But like I said, we aren’t friends. Especially since you got Bradford killed.”

“Bradford got himself killed,” I said. “And he died saving the city from Abaddon.”

“Which is the only reason I don’t sick every Nicht in this place on you.”

“That isn’t the only reason.”

She smiled. “Maybe. Maybe not. You only come by when you need something. What is it this time?”

“You’ve been following the news?”

“Television? Hell, no.”

“The real news,” I said. “Italy? Somalia?”

Her face turned dark. “Yes. I take it you know something about it?”

“I know everything about it.”

“Do tell.”

“Not so fast. I’m working on the cause, but you’re right, I need something from you. Two things, actually.”

“You can’t have any more of my people. They have a knack for dying around you.”

I felt a slight sting at those words. Not because of Bradford. Because of Elyse.

“Not people,” I said. “Artifacts, if you have them.”

“If I don’t?”

“Maybe you can tell me where to find them?”

“Maybe. What’s in it for me?”

“The usual. The survival of humankind.”

“You don’t do anything small, do you, Diuscrucis?”

“Not lately. Believe me; I’d prefer to be out chasing vampires, too.”

“Yeah, well, I need a little more to go on than the survival of humankind. You’re still half demon, which means you lie.”

“Only by necessity.”

“Whatever.”

I laughed at that, and then removed Uriel’s sword from my back, sliding it a few inches from its sheath. Bianca’s eyes lit up at the sight of it.

“I’ll give you anything you want in exchange for that.”

“It isn’t for trade. Where I got it is the reason I’m showing it to you. This is Uriel’s sword, the one that he forged for Michael during the First War.

“Where did you get it?”

“From Uriel.” I paused for effect. “In Heaven.”

Her awe was mixed with her disbelief. “You went to Heaven? He gave that to you?”

“Yes, and yes. Because what we’re up against is bigger than Heaven and Hell, good and evil. I know you hate the Divine, and that Joe always wanted to destroy them all. The thing is, without the Divine, humankind dies, too. My sister, Sarah, intends to kill every last one unless I stop her. I can only stop her if you help me.”

Bianca was silent for a moment. She stared at the sword, and then at me. Asking the Nicht Creidem to help me stop the extinction of the Divine was a risk in itself. The whole reason they existed was to get Heaven and Hell to stop meddling in the affairs of mortals.

“Killing Divine?” she said.

“Yes.”

“If the angels and demons are gone, why does humankind go too?”

“We’re too deeply enmeshed for the balance to be maintained without the opposing forces.”

“Bullshit.”

“Is it? What happens when you die?”

She thought about it. “So?”

“What happens if God is dead? What happens if Hell no longer

exists?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your soul becomes trapped in your corpse,” I said. “Forever.”

Her face paled. “What?”

“Think about that. Your soul has a consciousness of its own. When your shell dies, it wakes up. It wants to be free, but without a Divine hand to guide it, there’s nowhere for it to go. There’s no way for it to escape. An eternity imprisoned.”

I wasn’t sure if any of that were true or not. It sounded good, and Bianca was buying it.

“Our mission is to destroy the Divine,” she said. “Now you’re saying we’d be screwing ourselves?”

“Your war is as endless as theirs, and you know it,” I said. “The Nicht Creidem are an important part of the balance, just like everything else.”

She bit her lip, thinking about it. I waited patiently. I knew she would break.

“I hate you,” she said.

“I know,” I replied.

“What do you need from me?”

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“I’ve searched through the inventory, Landon,” Bianca said. “The only one we have is in our Berlin facility.”

“Can you tell them I’m coming?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? I’ll be executed for treason. I’m going to get in enough trouble for helping you already.”

“I’m trying to save your life.”

“The Nicht Creidem are like any other group; we have people that run the gamut from right to left. Me, I lean more liberal, which is lucky for you. I’m open to the idea that we’re just a cog in the machine. Berlin? They’re a bunch of tight-asses over there, and they aren’t going to go for the idea that we can’t survive without the Divine.”

“So you’re telling me I can’t get what I need?”

“I’m telling you that I can’t help you get it. You’re going to have to do some convincing of your own.”

I knew what she meant by convincing. “And you’re okay with that?”

“I don’t love the idea, but if half of what you told me is true,

then our options are pretty limited. I, for one, don't want to end up stuck in this body long after the sell-by date, if you know what I mean."

"What about the other item?"

She pushed her chair back away from her computer and stood up. "That I can help you with. Follow me."

We left her office in the garage, heading to an elevator in the back. The doors clanged shut, and she pressed the button for the bottom floor fifteen times. The elevator beeped as if she had just armed a nuclear device, and then we started to descend.

"I can give you the coordinates to the Berlin facility. Other than that, you're on your own."

"And I didn't get the intel from you?"

"That's right."

"What if your people talk?"

"They won't talk. We kill snitches. No, if they don't like it they'll challenge me directly." She smiled innocently. "And then they'll die."

I had seen her punch down a reinforced door without much effort. She had the tatts and the experience to back up her sass.

The elevator went down a good twenty floors, even though the garage was only five deep. The doors opened and fed out into a sterile white corridor. I was familiar with Nicht Creidem lairs. It seemed they had all been constructed from the same set of blueprints.

She led me through the corridors, into a small room with a guard stationed at its head. He seemed uncomfortable to see me, even if he didn't know who I was, but he opened the vault at Bianca's request without hesitation. We entered the storage area, and she ran her finger along the rows of storage safes until she found the one she wanted.

"Here it is," she said, putting her fingerprint to it to open it.

The cabinet slid open, and she lifted a flat, runed stone from it. She held it up to me.

"We got this from Reyzl's place after you took care of him for us. It was part of his private collection. Put it to the sword, and it will create a glamour of it that even Lucifer himself wouldn't be able to see through."

"You're sure?"

"We pride ourselves on knowing how all this stuff works."

“Do you have anything else I might like?”

She glared at me. “Don’t push it. I’m going to have to log this thing as it is, and I don’t want to put ‘lent to the Diuscrucis’ in the notes.”

“There’s a decent chance you won’t get it back.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I appreciate your help.”

“Yeah, well, I hope I don’t get in too much trouble for this. I might be forgiven if you really do save the world.”

“That’s the plan.”

She stared at me. “I don’t know why I trust you, or why I’m doing this. You’ve changed since the last time I saw you. I can see that much.”

The statement caught me by surprise. “Changed?” I didn’t feel that different. “How?”

“I’m not sure. It’s kind of like the difference between thinking you’re doing the right thing and knowing you’re doing the right thing.”

“Confidence?” I asked.

“With a side of focus, yeah. That’s part of it. It isn’t the whole thing, but close enough.”

She led me from the vault, back to the elevator and up to the garage. We returned to her office, and she pulled up the coordinates for the Berlin base on the screen.

“Take a look, commit it to memory. You didn’t get this from me.”

“Won’t they know you accessed the file?”

“They’ll know someone in this facility did. I’ll make sure to send them a package, so it looks like we were just cross-checking the address. Like I said, you didn’t get it from me.”

“Right. Thanks again.”

“You can thank me by getting things back under control. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope I never see you again.”

I nodded. “I hope you never see me again, too.”

“Good luck, Landon.”

She leaned up and kissed me on the cheek. Then I left the garage without another word, heading back to the alley at a fast walk. I arrived with ten minutes to spare and spent them scanning the rooftops and fire escapes. It was strange to me not to see any Divine around. No angels, no demons. At this time of night? I had been

back in the city for two years. I couldn't remember the last time the place had been so deserted, or if it ever had.

I knew it was because of Sarah. Any Divine with any sense was laying low, staying out of sight and waiting for this latest storm to blow over. Both sides had likely heard what she had done in Italy and Somalia. Neither wanted to be next.

I couldn't blame them.

Part of me expected Sarah to come swooping down out of nowhere. To take me by surprise and put an end to the game right then and there. I felt edgy at the idea of it, created by the void left by the absence of other Divine. This was how the world would be if Sarah had her way, at least until it all began to crumble and die. It was cold and frightening, lonely and sad. The Sleeping might not know the Divine existed, but they would feel it too. They would know the world was ending; they just wouldn't quite know how or why.

I shivered when Dante reappeared in the alley, in the same spot he had vanished earlier. That's how off-kilter the atmosphere had left me.

"Signore, are you well?" he asked.

"I'll survive," I replied.

"How did it go?"

"I got the mimic stone."

"What about the third eye?"

"Bradford was the best they could offer last time, so I wasn't expecting much. Bianca did tell me there's a ring in the Berlin facility. I have to go and get it. I could use a lift."

"Of course. All of my life I have dreamed of being your personal teleportation device."

I eyed Dante, raising an eyebrow. "Sarcasm?"

"An attempt to create levity through humor."

"It works for Obi. For you? Not so much."

"I will leave it to him in the future then." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Shall we?"

"Let's go."

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Dante delivered me a short distance from the facility, which turned out to be a relatively nondescript high-rise in downtown Berlin.

“Are you sure you need the eye?” he asked as we both looked at the building.

Even from the distance, I could see there were half a dozen men in suits milling around outside trying to look like they weren’t part of the security detail, which consisted of another half a dozen men in uniforms. Judging by the location, this Nicht Creidem hideaway was a higher value target than the garage in New York would ever be.

“Not completely,” I replied. “I’m working on the assumption that the Fist can go invisible because of Rebecca’s natural ghost power. If I’m right, getting my hands on an eye will lessen the handicap quite a bit.”

“It is a big assumption. Even if the Fist is using her power, it may not be manifesting the same way.”

“I know, but we need an edge if we’re going to have a chance, and this is the only thing I can think of.”

“It is not a bad idea,” Dante said. “But that is only the outside security. I imagine it is tighter on the inside.”

“You don’t think I can make it through? I absorbed the power of an archangel.”

“One simple artifact used in a clever way can negate any amount of power.”

Just like the Box had been able to hold the Beast, and Abaddon before him. Of course, there had been nothing simple about the Box.

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

“I’m not able to penetrate their defenses against the Divine, but I will wait for you here, signore. I will be prepared for a quick getaway if you need it.”

“Thanks. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck, Landon.”

I headed down the street, away from the Lord of Purgatory. I glanced back over my shoulder once as I closed in on the building, just in time to see him duck into a coffee shop.

Typical.

“Excuse me,” I said, reaching one of the supposed-to-be undercover security guards.

He turned to look at me, his head tilting to the side like a dog as his secondary senses registered confusion about my nature.

“My name is Landon. Also generally known as the Diuscrucis. I need to borrow something from you.”

I had told Dante I would be careful. This wasn’t exactly careful, but it was a lot more efficient.

He said something in German that sounded like ‘red alert’ or ‘alarm.’ Then he tried to punch me.

I stepped out of the way, grabbing his wrist and throwing him to the ground behind me. I could hear him cry out as he bounced into a passerby, and then more shouts started going up. The uniformed guards were drawing their guns while civilians did their best to clear the area.

I put my hands up. “I just want to talk. There’s no need to-“

I saw the muzzle flash, heard the report, and felt the bullet enter my chest. It hurt going in, and it hurt as I pushed it back out. I pulled my power up ahead of me, catching the follow-up volley, slowing the slugs to zero velocity before they could touch me again.

“I tried to do this the easy way,” I said, even as I threw the

captured lead out ahead of me. It whipped back toward its origin, catching most of the shooters in their hands and causing them to drop their weapons.

I began walking toward the entrance. The guys in the suits charged toward me, producing blessed and cursed knives as they did. I gathered my power close, waiting for them to close in before pushing it out around me and into the ground. They tumbled over against the shockwave, leaving my path clear. I didn't slow as I reached the uniformed guards, who were on their knees near the entrance clutching bleeding hands.

I went inside, throwing my power up again as a second round of gunfire erupted against me. I spotted the dozen or so Nicht Creidem soldiers on the inside, outfitted in bulletproof vests and dark fatigues, carrying heavy rifles and swords on their hips.

"Hold on a minute," I shouted again, this time in German. "I didn't come here to fight."

They didn't react to my words, lowering their guns when they saw how ineffective they were and charging at me with swords. Bullets couldn't kill any Divine, but they were able to slow some down and wound them enough to make the close range stabbing easier.

I pulled my power close, running it through my veins and into my muscles, using it to toughen my skin and increase my strength. I could feel the increased energy I had captured from Raguel, and I flexed my limbs in response to the power.

The first guard reached me, his sword flashing in a quick maneuver that I had no trouble following. I batted the blade aside with a bare hand, knocking it from his grip, and then shoved him with the opposite hand. I pushed harder than I expected, sending him hurting into another guard and knocking them both down.

I felt something hit my back, and I turned to see a runed sword against my firmer flesh. I grabbed it and snapped it in half, and then threw my power out below me, pushing myself into the air and across the lobby, landing on the reception desk.

"Seriously," I said again. "Just wait a second. I want to borrow something. Nobody else has to get hurt."

There was still no reply. The guards came at me again, trying to coordinate their movements to overwhelm me. I threw my power out again, knocking them over a second time. This was a fight they couldn't win, not unless they had a prison to catch me in or a

weapon that could deflect my power.

I hopped off the desk and headed for the elevators. One of the guards charged me a third time. I slapped the sword from his hand and grabbed him, turning him easily and taking his head in my arms, positioned so it would be too easy to break.

"Why won't you listen?" I asked.

"I told them not to," Sarah said.

She swept in through the front of the building, her wings flashing as they reflected the light.

I froze, letting the captured Nicht Creidem fall to the ground in front of me.

"Uriel's blade, brother?" she said, landing between me and the exit. "Your intention is to kill me and take my power?"

She sounded hurt.

Bianca had done a good job convincing me she was playing for the right team.

Damn.

"You were going to kill me back in Italy," I said.

"Out of necessity."

"Same here."

"I'm trying to save humankind. Isn't that our job?"

"You said I was breaking the balance, not keeping it."

"Yes."

"So are you."

"Yes."

That answer stopped me in my tracks.

"Are you surprised?" she said. "I know how my story ends, Landon. I've seen it, remember? When all the others are gone, when you're gone, I will be gone, too. That is the way it must be."

"If you destroy all of the Divine, there will be nothing left for anyone."

"I don't believe that. I have seen it."

"You haven't looked far enough. Things won't fall apart in an instant, but they will over time. Everything is connected. Everything is related. You can't kill an archfiend without another taking their place. You can't destroy two realms without destroying the third."

"It will all be destroyed if I do nothing," she said. "How can I stand by and watch everything die because of me?"

"Because of you?" I asked.

“My existence caused your existence. I helped unlock the Beast. I was the reason you stayed when you could have left this world behind.”

I felt my anger growing. “Is this about fate or guilt?”

“It is about what is and must be. The Nicht Creidem seek the end of the Divine, and with their help, I will achieve it.”

“You aren’t listening,” I said.

“No. You aren’t listening, brother. There are always three, remember? You cannot change what is or what will be.”

She wasn’t making any sense. Whatever was in her that was causing her to do this, it had stolen who she had been. The realization was as painful as if she were already dead.

I looked over her shoulder. I wasn’t ready to fight her, which meant I needed to get away, the third eye be damned. The problem was that Dante couldn’t pass through the entrance, his Divine power blocked by hidden runes and scripture. But if I could reach the other side, he could bamf us out.

All I had to do to reach the other side was time walk myself.

“Let us finish what we started, brother,” she said, moving toward me, her wings wrapping around her, the tips pointed my way. “Dante can’t intervene this time.”

“You’re making a mistake, Sarah,” I said. “A huge mistake. I know you think you’re doing the right thing, but you aren’t. You’re going to destroy everything. You’re going to become everything your father wants you to be. Everything the Beast tried to be.”

“You don’t know anything about it,” she screamed, so loudly it cracked the glass inside the lobby. “I am saving these people from us, and from him. I am protecting them from our chaos and destruction and death. I am sparing them from our reckless, wanton ambivalence.”

“You aren’t,” I said calmly. “You’re killing them.”

“No,” she replied softly. “I’m only killing you.”

She swept forward, so fast I could barely follow the motion. I clutched my power tight, dropping it behind me and falling backward into the spacetime bubble. It popped open on the other side of her, and I hit the ground closer to the entrance, a little disoriented but desperate to escape.

“Stop him,” she said, spinning around.

The Nicht Creidem jumped into action, rushing toward me as I stumbled to my feet. The front of the building was only a short

distance away, and I could see Dante on the other side, running toward it.

A serrated feather was sticking out of his side, and blood was running from a deep gash in his neck.

Somehow, Sarah had gotten the drop on him. Damn it.

He could have gone back to Purgatory to heal. He should have, but didn't. He stayed to help me.

I spun to face Sarah again, throwing my power out like a wall. It knocked the Nicht Creidem back, but did nothing to her, as she cleaved through it with her wings once more.

"I don't know who you are," I said.

"You never did," she replied.

I pushed off with my power, sending myself hurting back, through the cracked glass and out into the street. I hit the side of a car, denting it inward and coming to rest, every one of my ribs broken. Dante reached me as Sarah took to the sky, rushing toward us.

"Dante, get us out of here," I said.

"I cannot, signore. I'm too damaged. I can only return to Purgatory."

"Why don't you?"

He looked into my eyes with his own. They bore deep into my soul, giving me an instant chill.

"Take up the sword," he said.

"What?"

"There is no time. Use Uriel's blade. Capture my power. Now." His tone was serious, furious, commanding. His eyes burned red, in a way I hadn't seen in years.

"You want me to kill you?"

"No, but you must. Do it."

He had reached under my coat and retrieved the blade. He pulled it from the sheath and held it out to me. I looked past him to Sarah, who would be on us in seconds.

"Dante," I said. "I can't."

He smiled sadly and nodded.

Then he shoved the blade into his gut.

"Take it," he said, releasing the hilt. "Take the power, or you are going to die."

I didn't have time to say anything. Not thank you. Not goodbye. Not anything. I grabbed the sword, the rune at the end flaring as I

did.

The pain was intense. Excruciating. So much more so than it had been with Raguel. Dante was the Lord of Purgatory, maybe not on a level with God or Lucifer, maybe not even as powerful as Zifah, but he was no slouch. I was barely able to contain the agony, to fight against it and throw myself away from the car as Sarah came swooping down, wings stabbing at me, slicing violently through the fallen poet.

She screamed at my evasion, and I rolled over in time to see her toss Dante aside. He fell to dust as she did, scattering into the breeze.

I clenched my teeth to fight against the pain, the anger, the disappointment, and the new font of strength that was adding fuel to my fire. It still wasn't enough to beat Sarah; I could sense that much. Her power was unlike anything the Divine could muster. It was of a kind that was never meant to be.

"Now you," she said. Her eyes were cold. Cruel. She was bending the way Raguel had, her guilt and rage twisting her initial design into something more. Or was it less?

Either way, I knew there would only be one way to stop her, despite what I had told Josette.

I pushed myself to my feet. Dante's power was coursing through me, mingling with my own.

"Not yet," I said, closing my eyes.

I felt a familiar rush of air, and when I opened them, I was far, far away.

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“Landon?” Obi said.

I looked around the space, still a little disoriented. I was in Espanto’s hideaway, standing in the center of the workspaces. Obi was off to the left, looking up from one of them.

“That really sucked,” I said, falling to my knees. I felt nauseous and dizzy, and a little high on the power I had gained. It was like a massive hit of caffeine, leaving me jittery and cold.

Dante was gone. Dead. Worse than dead. Erased to nothing, just like that. And for what? To save my life?

My life wasn't worth it.

“What happened, man?” Obi asked, rushing over to me. “Where's Dante?”

“Gone,” I replied. “He sacrificed himself to save me. He gave me his power through the sword. Sarah caught up with us. She has a deal with the Nicht Creidem. They're helping her kill the Divine.”

“You mean a trap?”

“Yeah. Sort of. We thought Gervais was setting one for me. Sarah set her own.”

“Damn.”

“That's what I said.” I managed to pull myself to my feet. “She's different, Obi. She's lost it. Completely lost it.”

Obi looked stricken. He seemed to know what I meant without having to ask.

“Geez. I'm sorry, man.”

“Me too. There are no winners here. No matter what we're all going to lose something.”

We already had.

“What are we supposed to do? I take it you didn't get the third eye?”

“No. That part of the plan is shot. I got the mimic stone, though. It's better than nothing.” Dante’s power would be a huge help as well, though that thought was still a raw one. It was hard for the truth of what had just happened to sink in. The whole thing was surreal in the worst way possible.

“If Dante is gone, what happens to Purgatory?” Obi asked.

“I don't know. Probably nothing right away. Someone will have to take over for him, I suppose.” I paused, trying to settle my stomach. “That may be the least of our concerns right now. What time is it?”

“Here or in Indo?”

“Indo.”

“Nine o’clock.”

Gervais’ demo of the Fist was in two hours. That didn’t leave us a lot of time.

“I was feeling a little better about this a few hours ago,” I said.

“It’s not your fault, man. I’m sure you did everything you could.”

“It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t even close.”

“You have to bounce back. There’s no other choice.”

“I know.”

I fought against the tide of emotions that threatened to sweep over me. I railed against the upset in my gut, and in my soul. I had already known I would have to kill Sarah. The promise I had made to Josette had been made with the hope of an outcome I didn’t believe in. It was like a lie, but not quite. I had told her there were no guarantees.

The door across the room opened, and Alichino wandered in. He looked at me strangely when he did, and for a moment I thought it

was because he had forgotten about me again.

"Dante?" he said, his snout curling and his eyes beginning to water.

They had been friends. Close friends. Somehow, the demon could see his power in me. The truth of the last few minutes punched me in the gut again.

"I'm sorry," I said. "He sacrificed himself for me."

Alichino nodded sadly and then fled the room.

"Poor little guy," Obi said, watching him for a moment. Then he turned back to me. "So, are we going to call back your girlfriend to help us out with this?"

"No. Not that I don't want her beast-mode on our side for this, but we won't be able to surprise Gervais if her aura is blaring across the countryside."

"Do you think we're going to surprise him?"

"It's fifty-fifty, but that's what the stone is for."

"Right. When do you want to head out?"

"No better time than now," I replied. "Can you get me a location that's a little further out than we had planned? Dante was going to drop us, and I'm not that comfortable with his method of transportation just yet. I want a little breathing room in case I screw it up."

Obi laughed and returned to his workstation. "Can do."

He called me over a minute later. I had managed to quell my nausea by then, and get a better feeling for my increase in power. I hadn't been expecting to gain some of Dante's abilities along with his Divine energy. That was a surprise bonus.

"Bogor, Indonesia," Obi said, showing me the view from Google Earth. It felt like a different world compared to New York City, though it seemed equally as crowded. "It's about thirty miles outside of Srizyl's main compound. As long as we avoid the attention of any Divine, we should be able to disappear in there for a while."

"Sounds good."

"Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Not completely."

He smiled. "But if you teleport with me, I'm not going to wind up with my head where my ass is or anything?"

"I'm not making any promises."

"I can stay here."

I looked at him. He smiled.

“Right. Let me grab my Nintendo power gloves and I’ll be right back.”

He headed for the door.

“You are coming back, right?” I asked.

He winked before he disappeared.

I slumped down into his abandoned chair, suddenly feeling exhausted. I didn’t know how much more I could take. At least when I was fighting the Beast, I was going up against an enemy whose motivations that I maybe didn’t understand but at least could villainize. Sarah was a different story. She wasn’t a monster. She was a person. Powerful? Yes. Confused? Yes. Lost? It seemed like it. But still at least part human. Beyond that, she was like a sister to me, or maybe like a daughter. Either way, I loved her like family. Even her efforts to kill me hadn’t changed that.

Obi returned a minute later, wearing the gloves Uriel had made for him, along with a leather jacket and jeans. He looked badass, focused and ready to bring it. I needed to be the same.

“Thanks for coming back,” I said as I stood and met him halfway.

“You know I’ll never abandon you when you need me.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Damn right.”

I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder. He put his hand on mine.

“Don’t get me bass-ackwards,” he said.

I closed my eyes and pictured the image from Google Maps.

A moment later, we were there.

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Bogor was as crowded as the picture had suggested, even at nine o'clock at night. The city was alive with activity, as motorcycles and scooters raced along narrow streets along with pedestrians, bicycles, and the occasional car.

Nobody took any notice of my arrival with Obi. We became an instant part of the landscape, just another flesh and bone obstacle to move past. Obi shouted with joy that his head and rear were in the right place, but otherwise we started walking along with the rest of the traffic as if we had been there all day.

The jump made me a little dizzy, but the effects were shorter-lived the second time. Maybe it was because I was more calm when I made it. Maybe it was integrating better with the rest of my energy. Maybe it was from experience. Either way, it gave me a growing sense of confidence that I could handle the power, and learn to use it to my advantage.

"What do you want to do now?" Obi asked. "We've got some time to kill."

"The teleport didn't knock me out like the last time," I replied.

“We should take advantage of the extra time. Rent a couple of bikes, head for the target, and be a little more judicious with our approach.”

“Agreed.”

We moved through the streets. I stopped at a few street vendors, asking them where I could get a pair of motorcycles. They barked out directions, pointing and waving through the throng. It took a few tries, but we found the place before long.

It was being run by a fiend.

“We can find another place,” Obi suggested.

We were standing across from the shop, out of sight. I was trying to decide if I wanted to announce myself to him or not. Odds were high that he was in Srizyl’s employ, which meant if he saw me he was sure to rat me out. I didn’t really need her to know I was coming before I got there.

At the same time, I knew next to nothing about the archfiend and getting a little intel from the demon had a lot of potential value. It wasn’t my intent to raid her compound and go right to wholesale slaughter. If I thought I could convince her to give up Gervais, I would.

“No. Let’s go talk to him,” I said, making up my mind. Beating around the bushes hadn’t worked for me so far.

“You sure, man?”

“Yeah. Come on.”

We moved across the crowd. The shop was small, with only four bikes out in front of it that looked like they were for rent. It had an open front, and the fiend was sitting behind a rickety table that served as a counter.

He looked up at our approach. His eyes landed on Obi first, pausing on the gloves. He tried to stand.

I pushed him back down with my power, pinning him to the chair. His head didn’t move, but his eyes flicked over to me.

“I’ve had a really shitty day,” I said in Indonesian. “Don’t make it worse.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he replied.

“English,” I said for Obi’s sake.

“I didn’t do anything,” he repeated in English. “I swear.”

“You work for Srizyl?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about her.”

“What?”

“Information.”

“She’ll kill me for talking to you.”

“If you don’t talk to me, I’ll kill you.” I grabbed the sword, pulling it from its sheath. The demon flinched at the glow of it. Cliche, but effective.

“What do you want to know?”

“How hungry is she?”

“Hungry?”

“For power.”

“Insatiable,” the demon replied. “Unstoppable. She’s only nineteen years old. Did you know that? She killed both her parents. Her brother. She made a deal with the local fiend, became his bride. He took her virginity. She killed him and took his estate the same night.”

“She didn’t go to Hell and come back?” I asked, surprised. I didn’t think that was even possible.

“She made a deal with Satan from here. The word is that she killed herself, and he sent her right back before her corpse was even cold.”

“Rosemary’s baby,” Obi said.

“I don’t know what that is,” the fiend said.

“Can she use hellfire?” I asked.

“A little. She can read people’s minds. Control them. She has a whole host of mortal slaves, orphans mainly. They do whatever she wants. She controls the police, too. The judges. Everything in Bogor.”

“There are no angels here?”

“Look around. You won’t find any.”

“If another demon offered her a deal, would she take it?”

“What kind of deal?”

“Power beyond what she can get on her own.”

“Yeah, she’d take it, and turn on whoever made the offer once she had it.”

“Even if the demon was more powerful than her.”

He smiled. “She would find a way. Even if it took years. She doesn’t like being bound to anyone. What she’s accomplished already is legendary among the demons in Indo.”

I looked over at Obi, considering. She wouldn’t be open to a deal with me. It also didn’t sound like she would be that open to a deal

with Gervais either. If he was coming to show her the Fist, she would have a trap of some kind prepared for him. Then again, if he was using her to get to me, he would also be using her nature against both of us. There were too many possibilities, and I was sure Gervais had calculated all of them, manipulating everything to get it where he wanted it. That was his true gift, his real power.

It was enough to make my head hurt.

"I think we're going to do this the easy way," I said.

"Easy way?" Obi asked.

I stabbed the fiend in the chest, drawing out his power into me. It stung a little, but he didn't have much to offer.

"I'm getting kind of tired of games," I replied.

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We took two of the motorcycles and were making our way out of the city a few minutes later. Obi didn't seem too happy that I had been so callous about killing the fiend, but seeing as how it was a demon, he wasn't too unhappy either.

Like I had told him, I was getting tired of the games. I didn't want to fall into another one of Gervais' carefully crafted traps, and I didn't want to try to figure it out ahead of time. Not anymore. The run-in with Sarah had stolen what remained of my patience, and learning about Srizyl had only solidified my change in plans.

I was done with finesse. I was done with strategy. I was going to hit Srizyl, and I was going to hit her hard. When Gervais showed up with the Fist, I was going to hit them, too.

I told Obi as much. He wasn't in love with the idea, but he wasn't going to argue either. Not now. Besides, there was a lot to be said for the power of anger and desire. Plenty of others had done more with less by sheer force of will.

We rode the bikes out into the countryside, past numerous farms and small towns and into the foothills of the local mountain. We

had the coordinates for Srizyl's estate, and Obi used his phone's GPS to keep us on the right track as we finally abandoned our rides and traveled on foot. He turned off the device once we were within a couple of miles of the facility, in an effort to get close without being detected. Just because I wanted to go in guns blazing didn't mean I wanted to get taken out before we even got there.

We cut a wide angle across the landscape, through some thick vegetation and uneven ground until we reached a low stone wall that marked the beginning of Srizyl's land. Checking the time, we had about an hour before Gervais was supposed to show up with the Fist. In my mind, I was hoping to greet him with an empty compound and all of the power of the archfiend and her minions at my disposal. It might not be enough to take on Sarah yet, but it had to be sufficient to fight the Fist.

At least, I hoped it would be.

We approached cautiously, circling the estate until we came within sight of the front gates. We gained some high ground from there, looking down on the manned security stations surrounding the compound, where human slaves monitored the area while toting heavy assault rifles. A secondary security detail was spread across the spaces between the buildings, this one composed of demons. Vampires and weres for the most part, with a few succubi thrown into the mix, which seemed out of place.

The over-sexualized demons weren't normally deployed for defense. Rather, they were better suited for seduction, both of humans and other demons. It was weird to see them standing with the other guards, their over-proportioned breasts threatening to break out of their olive green t-shirts, the curve of their rears poking out from beneath matching short shorts. It was as if Hugh Hefner had designed their uniforms.

"I hadn't seen that before," Obi whispered to me, from our position in the brush on one of the hillsides near the front gates.

"I don't know what the point of it is," I agreed.

"Maybe she set them up to meet Gervais when he shows."

"Could be. I doubt they're very good in a fight."

"Especially dressed like that. How do you want to play this?"

I scanned the courtyard, pointing to the largest building. "I'm guessing Srizyl is in there, somewhere. If I carry us to the door, maybe we can sneak inside without being seen."

"Yeah, maybe. It'll make things a lot easier if we can surprise

her."

"After that, just stop anything that tries to stop you. We'll secure the area, and then we'll wait for Gervais to show up. With any luck, we can take down the Fist before he knows what's happening."

"Luck isn't our strong suit, man," Obi said.

"Then we have to make our own." I put my hand on his shoulder. He flexed his hands beneath the gloves Uriel had made him.

I was only moments away from teleporting us when I saw a beam of light appear some distance away. My hand slid from Obi's shoulder as I turned toward it, squinting my eyes to make out the source. Headlights.

A limo was headed toward the facility, its lights cutting through the darkness. I didn't need to see the occupant to know who it was.

"Damn it, he's early," I said, annoyed with Gervais for showing up ahead of schedule. Of course, I didn't believe he was early. He was there at exactly the time he wanted to be.

"You're sure it's him?" Obi asked.

"As sure as I can be," I replied.

"Does he have the Fist with him?"

"I don't think so."

"A double-cross?"

"I doubt it. He's probably got some grand entrance planned for his prize."

"Look," Obi said, pointing back to the compound. A light had gone on in an upstairs window of the main building. A moment later, a head of long, dark hair leaned out of it, locking onto the oncoming lights.

Srizyl. I knew her as soon as my eyes landed on her. I could sense her power, feel her aura. I ducked as her head swept up our way as though she had felt me at the same time. That was impossible. I didn't have an aura of my own. Neither did Obi. Still, something had attracted her attention.

Her eyes passed over our position, and then she vanished back into her room. A moment later the guards on both sides of the walls were in motion, organizing into ranks. The succubi lined up at the front of the defenses, standing crisply at attention ahead of the compound gates, their appearance within the ranks of soldiers almost comical.

There was more to them than met the eye. I was sure of it. Part

of Srizyl's ruse to try to steal the Fist from Gervais? He would assume they were, but then again, maybe that was the goal. It took a lot of layers of misdirection and mistruth for one demon to get the best of another.

The door to the main building opened as the limo was slowing in front of the gates. Srizyl slipped out into the night in a brightly-colored but sheer robe, the lines of her body suggestive beneath it. She was flanked on either side by two more succubi. They resembled the others, though their clothing was composed of more modest business attire.

Two dozen mortals spilled out behind them, carrying trays of food and drink in their mistress' wake.

"You have a new plan?" Obi asked me as the gates opened to let the limo inside. It moved forward about a dozen feet before coming to a stop again.

The door opened.

Gervais slid smoothly from the limo. Zifah was standing contentedly on his shoulder, leaning against the side of his head.

I glanced over at Obi, confused.

First, was the diminutive demon the one calling the shots?

Second, where the hell was the Fist?

Srizyl met the two demons at the front of the car, bowing her head to both of them, or maybe just to Zifah, before motioning her mortal slaves forward bearing their trays of food. Zifah moved back and forth across Gervais' shoulders as he examined each tray, waving it all past until he was presented with a large bowl of popcorn. The demon smacked his lips and pointed to it. One of the succubi reached into the bowl and recovered a kernel, bringing it to Zifah's face. The demon flicked it from her fingers with his tongue, and then licked her fingers for good measure.

"This is disgusting," Obi said.

"Tell me about it," I replied.

Srizyl's lips moved, and Gervais nodded in response. Then she pointed back at her demon soldiers, singling out the succubi. She said something else and they came forward. Zifah looked at them, his eyes lighting up.

He always had been a perv.

"Okay, now what?" Obi whispered.

"I've got an idea," I replied. "Wait here. Back me up if I look like I'm in trouble."

“Wait? Back you up? What?”

I fixed my eyes on the spot between the three demons and teleported myself to it.

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I came back into existence right in the middle of things, appearing from nowhere between Srizyl and Gervais. I didn't hesitate, certain of what I needed to do, pulling in my power and strengthening my body.

Then I punched Gervais as hard as I could, my fist blasting into his nose and teeth.

Pain lanced through my hand as the impact reverberated through my entire arm, rattling me and pushing back in a way I hadn't expected, while a shower of blue energy exploded from the archfiend's head.

What the?

The deflection shoved me back into the still shocked Srizyl, throwing me backward and down on top of her in a heap. I kept my eyes forward, locked on Gervais, as the glamour fell away and the Fist of God was revealed.

"Oh, wow," Zifah said. "Landon. I wasn't expecting that. Holy moly. Where'd you learn that trick?"

I threw out my power, getting myself up and off the demon and

ready to defend myself. Gervais wasn't Gervais? Where the hell was he?

"I mean, we figured you were going to show up, even if you didn't want to. But that? That was awesome. I mean it."

"You didn't glamour the Fist for me?" I asked.

Zifah was standing on the things shoulder. It had its hands up, ready to fight back if I attacked it, but otherwise wasn't making any aggressive moves.

"Nah. Why would we bother with that? That part of the ruse was for Srizyl here."

"What?" Srizyl said behind me.

The Fist's left hand moved, spreading away from me. Three bolts fired, launching through the succubi beside me. They vanished in a heap of dust.

"They're sexy, don't get me wrong," Zifah said. "But I know what you did to them. Poison? Really, Srizyl? I'm the son of Lucifer. Do you think I'm that stupid?"

"My Lord Zifah," Srizyl said. I looked back to see her drop to her knees. "My apologies. I couldn't be sure that you were not using me."

"Blah, blah, blah. I am using you," Zifah replied. He looked over at me. "You have something we want."

"You knew about the sword?"

"We guessed after we heard Sarah went cuckoo on you. If anyone was going to be able to talk Uriel into putting it back together, it was you."

"You keep saying we," I said. "Where is that asshole, anyway?"

The Fist pointed up the hill, back the way I had come.

Damn.

I turned my head slowly. Gervais was coming down the slope, a knife to Obi's neck.

"We had eyes watching out for you and your friend in Bogor," Zifah said. "I thought you would have guessed that."

"I didn't see any demons."

"You don't always need to use demons," Zifah replied. "Cash works just as well. Hey! I just had a thought. You got the sword from Uriel, and you dropped in on me like Dante." He stared at me, his eyes narrowing to slits. "You sneaky devil. You're more evil than I thought."

"He did it to himself," I said.

“Sure he did. Come on, Landon. If you’re going to be bad, be bad. Don’t make excuses.”

I didn’t respond to him a second time. He was probably trying to get under my skin.

Gervais marched Obi through the gates and around the car, stopping beside the Fist.

“Hello, mon ami,” he said. “I’d shake your hand, but as you can see, I’m a little tied up at the moment holding a knife to your best friend’s throat.”

“I still can’t believe you and Zifah are working together.”

“It is a marriage of convenience, I admit. I would prefer to do this on my own, but we do what we must. Now, I will need the sword, s'il vous plaît.”

“Landon, don’t,” Obi said, his breath short from the choke hold.

“Be quiet,” Gervais said. “He isn’t going to listen to you, anyway.”

“If I give you the sword, you’ll kill all of us, and take enough power that you can use it on Sarah.” I looked at Zifah. “He’ll use it on you, too.”

“Landon, what kind of monster do you think I am?” Gervais said. “I wouldn’t hurt my own daughter, even though she killed me and sent me back to Hell. No, I want her to rule at my side, as always.”

“Nobody believes that,” I said.

“But it is true. I am capable of telling the truth once in a while.” He tightened the knife against Obi’s neck, enough that a line of blood formed along the edge. “Come now. We already know what you are going to do. You will give me the sword because in your heart you believe that you will still succeed. You always have been stupid that way.”

“I’ve always succeeded,” I said.

“No, others have succeeded for you. There is no one, mon ami. No friends left to come to your aid. Elyse, Rose, even Rebecca and apparently Dante. They are all gone. Obi is all you have left, and if you don’t save him, he will be gone, too.”

I looked Obi in the eye. He wasn’t afraid to die. He had seen Heaven already, and I had no doubt he would go there.

“Fine,” I said, reaching a hand behind my back.

“Slowly,” Zifah said.

I did as he asked, keeping my movements deliberate as I reached

under my coat and found the mimic stone. I tapped it against the sword as I brought it back, feeling the form change in my hand. I was just like the real thing.

I brought it out and up. It was an identical replica, a perfect glamour. It weighed the same, balanced the same, glowed the same. I shoved it point-first into the ground and took a step back.

"There it is. Let him go."

Gervais smiled, and actually did as I asked, shoving Obi to me as he stepped forward and picked up the blade.

"You really are stupid, man," Obi said.

Gervais hefted the sword, clearly fooled by the glamour.

"Step aside, Landon," he said. "You're free to go. I don't need your power when there are so many other Divine to kill, and you can't hurt me anyway."

I moved out of his way, and he thrust the sword forward, into Srizyl's chest. Her eyes widened as she expected to be stabbed, only to find the attack ineffective.

"What?" Gervais said, caught by surprise. If I could have framed the look on his face and held it in my soul forever, I would have.

"It's showtime," I said.

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I reached behind my back for the real sword, at the same time Gervais tried to stab Srizyl again, not quite believing what was happening.

"Attack," Srizyl shouted, putting out her hand toward the demon.

He barely escaped a short burst of hellfire from her, even as I got Uriel's blade free and chased after him with it.

Srizyl's demons didn't seem to know who to attack right away. They headed for me instead of the Fist, while dozens of her mortal slaves began pouring from the buildings, armed with standard issue guns.

Obi intercepted the demons, slamming into them with the power gloves, flinging them aside. The bullets started coming a moment later, digging up divots of the ground around us as their wielders tried to find their aim.

"Zifah," Gervais said, doing his best to get away from me. "Don't just stand there."

The Fist started to move, lurching toward me, a massive arm

swinging out to hit me in the chest. I ducked beneath it, bringing the sword up in a quick test of the armor's ability to withstand the special blade. It skidded off the scriptured metal without leaving a mark.

I had figured it would be impervious.

I stopped chasing Gervais, using my power to stop myself and reverse course, shooting up in a spray of earth and reaching for Zifah. The Fist vanished a moment later, and my hand wrapped around empty air.

"Landon," Obi said, his voice tense.

I rolled on the ground to my feet, throwing up my power and creating a wall between him and the shooters, watching as a dozen bullets froze in mid-air before they could slice him in half. I closed my eyes for an instant, reappearing beside him, grabbing him and teleporting again. I dropped him on the wall beside one of the shooters, and he took hold of the mortal and wrenched the gun from his hand.

"I don't want to kill these people," he said.

"We don't have a choice right now."

"Kill her, lose the mind control."

"I'll do my best."

He didn't look happy, but he turned on the other slaves and returned fire, bullets knocking them from their perches.

I teleported again, to where Gervais was desperately trying to defend himself from Srizyl. I was getting more used to the power with every use, finding it easier and quicker every time I jumped.

The archfiend sent another blast of hellfire at Gervais. He stepped aside, his form changing, his hands elongating into claws. He had already used his own gift to claim power from Randolph Heart's goons and make himself an uber-vampire, and now he used it, leaping at Srizyl and catching her off-guard.

I used my power to push him away from her, sending him sprawling. I wanted the Divine energy she could provide for myself.

I threw myself at her, bringing the blade up to strike.

The Fist appeared beside me. It's arm launched out, hitting me square in the side and sending me tumbling away. I hit the ground and rolled to a stop, pushing myself back to my feet. The Fist vanished again.

Uriel's blade rested a few feet away. I pulled it back to me and made a quick survey of the battle.

Gervais was going after Srizyl again, while Obi had managed to clear half of the shooters from the wall, and was pinned down in a firefight with the other half. Where was Zifah?

I closed my eyes, teleporting across the field, reappearing and looking back to see him materialize where I had just been standing. I had figured as much. I blinked out again, coming back to the world a few feet from Srizyl. She saw me and stopped. I grabbed her by the arm, throwing her aside, bringing the sword around as Gervais pounced. His eyes became saucers, and he rolled his body, landing awkwardly beside me and scrambling to get away. I turned to reach for him, only to sense the Fist as it appeared behind me.

I kicked backward, feeling my foot connect with the Fist's chest and knock it back. I used the momentum to throw myself forward, wrapping my arms around Srizyl and teleporting again, bringing us up to the top of the hill outside the compound.

"Diuscrucis," Srizyl said, her expression fearful.

"Let go of your slaves," I said.

"What?"

"Release them. Help me fight the Fist, and I'll let you live."

She nodded. The shooting stopped a moment later. "Very well."

I teleported her back to the fray, dropping her in front of Gervais. She put her hand out, hitting him with a blast of hellfire that singed the side of his face. He screamed and rolled away, calling out for Zifah.

The Fist appeared again, closing in on us. Srizyl turned toward it, sending a gout of hellfire from her hands, which bounced harmlessly off the scriptured metal. Zifah aimed the armor toward her, while I tried to circle around. He broke off the engagement, facing me instead, not worried about the archfiend.

"She can't hurt me, Landon," the demon said.

"No," I heard Obi say behind him. "But I can."

A gloved fist appeared behind the Fist's back, smashing hard into the diminutive hellspawn. The force sent him flying from the weapon's shoulder, screaming as he tumbled through the air, landing on the ground fifty feet away and steaming from the scripture on the blessed gloves. He got to his feet, shaking himself off, his aura growing around him as he reversed the damage. He was the son of Lucifer. He wouldn't be that easy to kill.

The important part was that we had knocked him away from the Fist, and broken the connection that allowed him to control it.

“Score one for the home… oof!”

Obi was thrown backward as the Fist continued to move, spinning and hitting him hard in the gut. He landed with a thud and didn’t move again.

“Son of a bitch,” I whispered, seeing him laying there. The Fist readjusted, coming about and marching toward me. I could hear Zifah’s laughter at my back.

“Nice try, Landon,” he said. “You almost got me. Riding the Fist is fun, not a necessity.”

The Fist vanished.

I felt my teeth lock together in anger, and I threw myself at the small demon, desperate to stick him to the end of Uriel’s sword. He jumped back in fear at my approach, pulling one of his needles and throwing it at me. I batted it aside easily, closing the gap between us in seconds.

The Fist reappeared in front of me. I slammed headlong into it with enough force to lift it up and back, knocking it over Zifah and landing on the other side. It grabbed me by the shoulders, the swords on its wrists extending and sticking into both sides of my chest, leaving me hanging from it.

Zifah climbed up beneath me, sticking his face in mine. “Sorry about your friend. Thanks for the sword.”

He reached for my hand, dangling at my side and holding the blade.

I didn’t say anything. I closed my eyes and teleported away, coming to rest on my hands and knees beside Obi.

“Diuscrucis,” Srizyl said, rushing to us. “You can’t leave me here with them.”

“You’re right,” I said, looking up at her and raising Uriel’s sword. “You have something I need.”

She shrunk back in fear, her hands coming up to shoot hellfire at me. I threw my power out, pushing her hands aside, spreading her open so I could plant the blade in her gut. In my anger, I barely noticed the pain.

She turned to ash as I put my hand on Obi’s shoulder and willed us both away.

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I didn't go back to Mexico. That would have been stupid. Obi was hurt, and there was nothing I could do to save him. My power to heal didn't extend to others. Not anymore.

Instead, I came into existence at New York Presbyterian Hospital, right in the middle of the lobby. I quickly hid Uriel's blade back beneath my coat, and then called out for help at the same time I removed Obi's gloves from his hands. A nurse rushed over a moment later, oblivious to the fact that I had just appeared out of nowhere.

"What happened?" she asked, at the same time she motioned for help.

"He got hit by a car," I said. It was close enough to the truth. The Fist had a similar amount of force.

She looked back at him. "Detective Sampson?" she said, recognizing him. She looked at me again. "You found him like this?"

"No. I was with him. I'm a friend of his. Must have been a drunk or something, came around the corner and slammed right into him.

He didn't even slow down."

"Did you get a plate?"

"Yeah, right. I carried him here as fast as I could. We were only a couple of blocks away."

"You shouldn't have moved him."

The orderlies brought a gurney. A doctor knelt next to him and checked him from the ground. "Let's get him loaded up and stabilized. He's alive but unconscious."

I felt a bit of relief at the fact that he was still alive. A seraph could heal him once he was stable.

"We'll take it from here," the nurse said. "Can you fill out some paperwork for us?"

"I can't. I have to run."

She moved to protest, but I closed my eyes and teleported away, coming to rest on the steps of St. Patrick's. I paused there for a moment, leaning over, my body exhausted. Increased power or not, I was using a lot of it in a hurry. I needed to slow down. I stumbled on the steps, coming to rest and putting my hands up to my face.

"Damn it," I shouted into them, muffling my scream.

Not only had Obi gotten hurt, but Zifah had shown his control of the Fist to be greater than I had realized. Worse, I still couldn't hurt the damn thing, and I needed to at least slow it down in order to reach the little asshole. The failed attempt left me angry and frustrated and more than a little overwhelmed. Sarah had beaten me. Zifah had beaten me. I was getting tired of losing.

I rubbed at my face, feeling weary. Maybe Sarah was right. Maybe things had already gone so far that they were beyond my ability to stop. Maybe I was more problem than solution.

I turned back to look at the Cathedral. Josette said God was on my side. I certainly hadn't been feeling it while I got my ass kicked. Unless that was what she meant? I laughed at the thought. Was the Man Upstairs enjoying watching me make a fool of myself?

I got to my feet and headed up the steps and into the building. I felt a chill as soon as I entered, a reaction I had never experienced before. A moment later, my entire body began to tingle, every nerve ending reacting to something I couldn't see or sense. As I walked down the aisle, it seemed as if my steps were growing lighter and more energetic, my tired body and soul lifted and held by an unseen hand.

Was this God's work? Uriel's? Josette's?

Jane appeared from the transept, intercepting me in front of the altar.

"Landon," she said.

"I need help," I said. "My friend, Obi."

"New York Presbyterian?" she replied.

"How did you know?"

She looked up in answer. I got the point.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"He will be well. A novice has already been dispatched to treat him."

I let myself relax. At least something was going right.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The Fist. I thought Zifah needed to be touching it to control it. I was wrong."

"How, then?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Adam was controlling it with some kind of cybernetic interface. It was part technology, part Divine. But I destroyed it, and I didn't see any kind of control interface on Zifah. He's too small to hide anything like that."

"How did you break the control the last time?"

"I cut Adam's arm off. That won't work here. I can't even get close to Zifah without the Fist blocking me, and after Obi managed to slap him, I don't think he'll risk putting himself in the open again." I lowered my head, feeling the weight returning. "I'm losing this one, and I don't see any way not to."

"How can I help you?"

"If you sent someone to help Obi, you already have." I looked back at the pews. "If you don't mind, I'm just going to hang out for a little while."

"To pray?" she asked hopefully.

"To think," I replied. "I need to figure out what to do next, and everyone I used to lean on for support is gone."

"Not everyone, Diuscrucis," Jane said, pointing to the crucifix behind the altar. "If you need me, whisper my name. I will hear you."

"Thank you, Jane," I said.

"You're welcome."

She headed off again, leaving me alone. I retreated to the front row of pews, taking a seat on the corner. I glanced up at the crucifix for a moment before leaning back and closing my eyes. Jesus had

been absent while I was in Heaven. Why would he do anything for me here?

No. I was on my own. I couldn't count on Dante for advice. I couldn't look to Obi to monitor SamChan or scour the Darknet for clues. Alyx was still out there, but I was more convinced than ever that getting her involved would be the same thing as getting her killed.

I needed to solve this one myself.

I tried to relax, to breathe deep and even, to let my mind go. I needed to forget about the chaos swirling around me and find some measure of focus within the maelstrom. I couldn't do everything at once. I was one person, and could only do one thing at one time.

Right now, I needed to figure out how to stop the Fist cold so that I could get a solid shot at Zifah and his power. If I could accomplish that, I could move on to dealing with Sarah.

The hours passed as I retread my memories, from my first encounter with the Fist to the present, searching them for clues. As far as I knew, there was only one way to control the armors remotely. While it was possible Zifah had come up with an interface that was either smaller or completely different than the one Adam had used, the odds that he had altered the Fist itself were slim. The scripture on the armor shielded it from manipulation and making the wrong changes anywhere created the risk of making the entire system brittle. Assuming that was a risk that neither Zifah or Gervais was willing to take, it meant that there had to be a way to send signals of my own to the armor.

The trick was to figure out how.

The Fist's creator was dead and gone, but there was one person involved in the project that could potentially shed a little more light on how it worked.

I got to my feet, abandoning the pew and heading for the exit. Jane met me there.

"Your friend Obi-wan is on the mend," she said.

"I'm happy to hear it," I said, making a note to visit him as soon as time allowed. "Thank you for your intervention."

"Don't thank me," she replied. "Thank the Lord."

"You'll have to do for now," I said. "I've got work to do."

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The problem, as I saw it, was that getting my hands on Zifah was currently a catch-22. I couldn't stop the Fist without grabbing the demon, and I couldn't grab the demon without stopping the Fist. Rock, meet hard place.

The good news, if you could call it that, was that there was once small chance for me to get my hands on a pick and start chiseling away. The bad news was that the pick's name was Adam, and he wasn't exactly my biggest fan at the moment.

Adam had a direct hand in the creation of the Fist. He had been the one to hire Matthias and set him to work on the design; more specifically, the technical design of the interface between angel and machine. If there was anyone who knew how to disable it or knew someone who knew how to disable it, it was him.

Of course, I didn't know where to find Adam, and even once I did, I had no idea how I was going to get him to help me. My understanding was that he and Sarah were currently a thing, and it had been Sarah who instigated the whole relationship. She had convinced the fallen seraph to help her. Through lies? His own

volition? That was what I needed to find out. If he was on her side, contacting or otherwise capturing him was going to be a huge risk. If he told her where I was, that was going to be a problem.

Then again, her killing of Dante was a blessing in disguise for me, and a gross miscalculation on her part. As long as I could use his teleportation skills, I would be a much more difficult catch.

As if that would help me while the rest of the world burned.

All of that aside, the bottom line was that I was out of other options. Dante was gone, and Obi had landed in that hospital in payment for his solid friendship. I didn't take that fact lightly, and it was motivation that I needed.

I left St. Patrick's and started walking along 5th Avenue, absorbing the sights and sounds of the city, my city, as I crossed town. I knew from Alichino that Adam and Sarah had been staying in contact through Yuli, the little messenger demon who had once been Reyzl's pet. I remained surprised he was still kicking around the mortal realm, but in this case, I figured it could work out in my favor. I wasn't on bad terms with the little demon, and once I was able to locate him, I might be able to get him to hook me up with Adam. Considering the nature of a messenger's work, it would probably take a bit of torture or other coercion, but I could be a lot more persuasive than most demons or angels, especially since I wasn't bound by any of their rules or concerns.

I was almost down to the New York Public Library by the time I had finalized my plan of action in my head. I glanced over at the structure for a moment, doing a quick scan for Divine, noting that the area was uncommonly clear. Sarah had both sides on edge, and they were laying low and waiting to see what was going to happen next. Thanks to the fact that Sarah was one of the few people who would never forget about me, they had probably caught wind through the Nicht Creidem that we weren't on the best of terms at the moment. When two diuscrucis squared off, it was better just to get out of the way.

I closed my eyes, blinking out of existence there and back into existence on the flight deck of the U.S.S. Intrepid. It was another landmark that held memories for me, most of them not that great. The damage we had caused there had been long repaired, but I could still see it in my head. I had to push the rising tide of sadness aside and refocus myself. I wasn't here for a walk down trauma lane.

I made my way from the flight deck to the interior, sweeping the area visually. Yuli could be anywhere in the world right now. He could be sitting on Sarah's lap or meeting with Adam on the other side of the world at the very same time I was moving through his home base. My odds of finding him here were somewhere between slim and none.

That was okay because I didn't need to find him. I'd learned a lot about messenger demons since I had become Divine. One of the more important things I'd learned was that demons became familiars to a fiend or archfiend by using their true name, some energy, and some runes, and using all of these things to create a token that bound them. I knew that Reyzl had once had control over Yuli's token. Then Rebecca had taken it after she betrayed me and literally stabbed me in the back. I didn't know what happened to it after that, but my assumption was that unless Sarah had found the small bit of the demon's flesh, it was still under Yuli's control and tucked away somewhere.

Why the Intrepid? I knew for a fact this was where an entire pool of messenger demons were living. I hadn't cared enough at the time to know if Yuli was part of their community.

I cared now.

I moved away from the public exhibits, and through an access door marked 'Employees only.' I remained on that track as I navigated the interior of the ship, checking the cracks and crevices for signs of the demons. Pretty soon I was coming across clumps of cat hair, and soon after that larger bunches of fur still attached to flesh. Demons like Yuli were too small and too weak to take on much else.

I caught sight of the first demon trying to stay hidden between a pair of pipes that ran along the ceiling. He was pressed in pretty tight, holding to the shadows and hoping I would go past. I looked up at him; he looked back at me. When I held his gaze, and he realized who I was, he squeaked softly and tried to back up into the wall even more.

"Don't make me drag you out," I said.

The demon hissed.

"Really?"

He cursed under his breath, and then pushed himself out between the pipes, his body cracking as his skeletal structure returned to form. A small pair of wings held him up over my head.

“Whatsss do you wantsss, Diuscrucisss?” he asked.

“I’m looking for Yuli.”

“Who?”

I reached out with my power, throwing the demon against the wall and holding him.

“You know who,” I said.

He smiled. Messenger demons weren’t known for their backbone. “Yuli isssn’t here.”

“Where is he?”

“What do I looksss like? Hisss mother?”

“You’re way too ugly to be his mother, which says a lot. I need to talk to him.”

“I haven’t ssseen him in two monthsss or ssso. He left one day. He sssaid he had a job that would paysss very, very wellsss.”

Two months? Had Sarah been planning this for that long? That was a little before the day that Adam had fallen. Had she really seen everything unfolding the way she claimed?

“Is his token here?”

“I’m not telling you thatsss,” the demon said.

I pressed against him with my power again, flattening him to the wall. “I know there’s one thing that demons like you value more than secrets.”

His snout opened in a wicked smile, his tongue flicking between his teeth. “I can’tsss. Pleassse, Diuscrucisss. If you needssss messenger, I cansss do it for you.”

“Sorry, pal. I need Yuli.”

“He can’tsss tell you anythingsss.”

“I don’t need information from him. I just need him to take me to someone. Bring me to his token. I’ll use it to get him here, and that’s it.”

“You liesss.”

I let him go. He slapped his wings furiously and rubbed at his neck.

“I’m not a demon. I don’t need to lie. I promise. Take me to the token, let me summon him, and I’ll be gone. Nobody will even remember I was ever here.”

“Hmmm. You setsss many of usss free, Diuscrucisss. For thatsss, I will bring you.”

He swooped down into the corridor, flying ahead of me. I walked behind him, keeping his pace as he navigated easily through

the decommissioned aircraft carrier. Within minutes we were in one of the larger open spaces. There were at least two dozen of the small demons living here, each of them perched in dark corners behind pipes and equipment, their eyes barely visible through the cracks. They didn't protest my arrival. In fact, they all tried to shrink further away, just as my guide had. I left them alone.

"Here isss Yuli'sss space," the demon said, bringing me to a small opening between two metal boxes.

He ducked inside it, and I could hear him moving things aside beyond my view. He emerged a moment later, holding a small strip of worn flesh with runes etched into it. All of the demons in this room would have a similar token tucked away into their spaces, declaring them as free. My guide was showing a lot of faith in me to turn Yuli's over so easily, and to have led me here. I could easily gain control of every demon in the room if I decided to break my promise.

Not that I had any intention of doing that. I didn't want to be down here, and I had no need for two dozen nearly powerless demons. I reached out and took the token from the demon, running my fingers over the runes. The I pushed some of my power into it, feeling the change as I made the connection with the demon. If he were with Sarah, she was going to know something was up as soon as he disappeared, which meant that the second he showed up here the clock accelerated that much more.

"Yuli'grk'ishcalizi," I said, using his full name. "I summon you."

The runes on the token flared for a moment. Then the demon was hovering in front of my face.

"Diuscrucissss," he said, his eyes growing wide. He looked around in a panic. "You gavesss him my tokensss? Whysss?"

"Yuli, relax," I said. "I need you to tell me where Adam is. That's all."

"She'll killsss me. She'll killsss usss all."

"She's going to anyway if we don't stop it. Adam. That's it. Where is he?"

He dropped onto my hand, grabbing at his token. I let him take it. I didn't need it anymore. He seemed calmer once he had it. He looked up at me.

"He won't be happy to see yousss, Landonsss."

"I know. I can't worry about that right now. Where is he?"

"You can'tsss reach himsss. No onesss can."

“If he’s in the mortal realm, I can reach him,” I said, getting impatient. “Where is he?”

“No, you can’tssss. Isss impossible.”

“Can you show me? If I can see it in my mind, I can go there.”

He nodded. “I cansss show you.” He held out a clawed hand. “Takesss it.”

I took his hand. I could feel the power pass between us, and then I saw an almost ethereal view of Adam layered over reality. The fallen angel was sitting in a small room. A cell of some kind, with dark hewn walls and little light. He didn’t look happy.

I didn’t know where in the world the cell was. I didn’t need to. All I had to do was picture it, and as long as it wasn’t protected with runes or scripture, I could travel there.

I pulled my hand away from Yuli’s. “I have what I need,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Be carefulsss, Landonsss,” Yuli said, surprising me. “Isss dangerousss.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I replied.

I closed my eyes and transported myself once more.

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Adam looked up at me the moment I appeared in his cell, his face twisting into an angry, expectant smile.

"Of course," he said. "My hero."

"What are you talking about?" I said, glancing around the room.

It was a cell for sure, the bars of which were loaded with writing that looked too familiar, and made my stomach drop.

Djinn runes.

Damn.

"I see you figured that out for yourself," he said. "I'm a prisoner here, courtesy of my stupidity."

"Sarah?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Tell me everything."

He shook his head. "Screw you, Landon. I don't owe you anything."

"You're going to owe me your freedom in a minute. Maybe you can pay me in advance."

He laughed. "Freedom? What the hell is that worth? I was

making a real difference before. Then I tried to do something good. I tried to do the right thing. I almost had you. I almost solved the equation. Then God does this to me?" He motioned to himself. His dark hair, his black eyes, his sooty wings.

"We already had this discussion," I said.

"Yeah, because you're perspective means anything to me. I knew something that apparently was more correct than I realized."

"Which was?"

"That you're a stain. A dark spot on the Divine. The problem, not the solution."

"Which is why Sarah reached out to you?"

"Yes. She came to me soon after I fell. She told me that I was right and that we could help one another. She had a plan to help me make amends with God, and to take care of you at the same time. I would get my revenge on you, and be able to return to Heaven. Who wouldn't jump at the chance?"

Nevermind the fact that God wouldn't be too accepting of an angel who was acting out in the name of revenge. "Except it didn't go the way you were hoping."

"Brilliant deduction. We started organizing other angels, trying to get a number of other seraphim and Touched on board, so we could petition God through prayer."

"You made quite an impression on Raguel," I said. "And quite a few other Touched."

"I know. I thought everything was going perfectly when Sarah told me how many would be at the Mass. She told me you might be there, too."

"And you told blue-eyes to expect me."

"Sarah wanted to make sure you would stay for the proceedings. She didn't want you disappearing."

"She wanted to kill me."

"I know. I was hopeful she would succeed." He looked away from me, at the wall to his prison. "She didn't say anything about slaughtering the rest of the Touched. I didn't know she planned to do that."

"You were there when she killed the changelings. You didn't have a clue that she was off-center?"

"A bunch of demonlings? Why would I care about that?"

"Brian was an angel."

"He wasn't a real angel. He was a twisted distortion, the worst

kind of changeling if you ask me."

Half his words were in line with his formally good soul. The rest were dark enough to match his outward complexion.

"When did you find out she killed them?" I asked.

"After I helped her kill the demons in Somalia. The Warlord we killed mocked me about it before he died. I confronted Sarah about the Mass, and she brushed it off as inevitable. Like the whole thing was just a thread that needed to wind its way around history. Then she admitted her full plan to me. Her desire to kill you notwithstanding, she's out of her mind. I told her as much. I thought she was going to kill me, but she brought me here instead."

"A djinn prison. Why?"

He smiled. "To capture you. Why else?"

"She knew I was going to come for you?"

"She can see into the future. I thought you knew that?"

"Her visions aren't always clear, and they aren't always correct."

"Maybe not before. She seems pretty accurate lately."

I reached out and put my hand on his bare shoulder. "Time to go," I said, closing my eyes. I pictured the steps of St. Patrick's again.

I opened my eyes. We were still in the prison.

"Shit," I said.

"She told me you're going to die in here, Landon. She told me if I kill you, she'll set me free. She'll let me remain when the others are gone."

He shifted, drawing a blade from behind him.

"You can't kill me," I said.

He stared at me, the anger obvious. "As much as I hate you, I know that's true. What choice do I have? There's no way out of here for either of us. She's seen what happens."

"She's seen a possibility. I told you, she isn't always right."

"Can I take that chance?"

"I can't decide that for you. We've got better odds if we work together, especially if it goes against what she's seen. If you attack me, I will end you."

I pulled Uriel's blade, holding it up ahead of him. How would the sword react to the power of djinn? The creatures weren't truly Divine, which explained how Sarah had been able to bring them over to her side. Would the sword be totally ineffective against them?

“Uriel’s sword,” Adam said, mesmerized by it. “He remade it for you?”

I nodded.

I could see his jaw working, clenching and loosening as he tried to deal with how much he hated me.

“You have God on your side,” he said at last. “Killing you isn’t going to help me much, is it?”

“No, but mending fences might.”

He slid to his feet, his eyes flaring. “Can you get us through those bars?”

I gathered my power, pushing it against the cell door. It broke free of its moorings, slamming into the opposite wall.

“I’ve only got one arm,” Adam said, lifting his dagger. “How many djinn do you think I can kill with it?”

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We moved out into the hallway. The corridor was similar to the cell, cut directly into dark stone, buried somewhere on the planet Earth. I tried to teleport again once we were beyond the bars. I had as much luck as the first time.

“Do you know where we are?” I asked.

“Deep underground,” Adam said. “Somewhere in the Congo. I could feel the moisture and the humidity when they brought me here.”

“Is Sarah here?”

I expected she would be. If she had known I was coming, she probably baked me a cake.

“She wasn’t before. She might be now. She can travel faster than an angel with those wings of hers. Not as fast as instant. That was a good trick, by the way. Where did you learn it?”

“Dante died to give it to me,” I said.

He nodded slightly. He wasn’t sorry. He didn’t really care that much. He was trying to do the right thing, but every thought he had was tinged with evil.

We moved through the corridor, finding a stairwell leading up. We took it, coming to a second magicked doorway. I blew this one from its hinges as well, surprising the djinn who were standing guard on the other side. They drew swords to fight us, their bodies remaining just material enough to swing the blades.

I blocked with Uriel's sword, slashing back, slipping the sword from the parry and getting it around to block again. Adam circled the other djinn cautiously, his single arm nearly a blur as he sought an opening. The blade whisked through the air toward the djinn's eye, and would have removed it if the creature hadn't dematerialized completely. It reformed a moment later, slashing down at Adam, who fell back cursing as a few more of the creatures appeared at the end of the hallway.

"Can't you do something a little more forceful?" he said as he slipped away from an incoming strike.

I gathered my power, lifting it up ahead of the incoming djinn. They ran into it as though it were a force shield, bouncing off the power. One of them put his hand to it and began summoning his magic, pushing against the barrier. It wouldn't last for long.

I ducked beneath a sword blow, planting my feet and shifting, hitting the djinn's sword with my first strike, reversing and getting the backhand through. I was surprised when I felt the blade sink into the phantasmal flesh of the creature, registering its existence.

I tried to draw its power out, preparing myself for the pain to follow.

Nothing happened.

The djinn cried out, stuck on the blade, unable to pull himself free. I cursed as well, struggling to pull the blade loose. It held fast to the creature, as though it wanted to steal its Divine energy but couldn't find any.

"Damn," I said.

Adam was struggling with his opponent, barely able to keep the pace with his one good arm. The reinforcements were almost through my shield, the power of it falling to their magic.

I didn't have much time to react. I had to get the blade out so I could keep fighting. I had to get rid of this djinn so he wouldn't be able to keep fighting.

I had an idea.

I pulled a piece of my power from the quickly crumbling barrier, pushing it gently into Uriel's blade. I felt a bit of resistance at the

maneuver, as though I was trying to shove the energy through mud. It flowed through the blade, changing the blue glow to a strange green as I calmly willed the djinn's energy to relax, to release itself back into the universe where it was first formed. If I couldn't take the creature's power, maybe I could at least disperse it.

The djinn seemed confused at first, unsure of what I was doing. He tried to materialize his sword arm, to bring his blade around and into me. I flinched as it passed through my face, unable to gain purchase in the mortal realm.

Then he began to scream.

I almost screamed with him. The power started to flow back into me, the djinn's energy escaping in every direction at once, blowing out from his spirit wherever it could. A portion of that power returned to me, not much, but something, as the djinn's form became complete.

I pulled the blade from his chest, ready to move on to the rest. Then I froze in surprise. The djinn was still alive and unharmed, standing in front of me whole and healthy. He lowered his hand to the point of entry, feeling for a wound. I watched as his fully white eyes changed, the pupils becoming a very human brown.

"What have you done?" he said to me, moving his mouth in confusion after the words came out, uncertain of the feel.

I stared back at him, the rest of the escape forgotten. What had I done, indeed? At first, I wasn't sure. I couldn't quite put a finger on it. The djinn was different; I could tell that much. How?

"A little help here," Adam said, noticing me standing limply beside my attacker.

I watched as his blade came up, biting into the side of the djinn's neck. He cried out in shock and pain as the blood began to flow.

Normal, human blood.

"What have you done to me?" he said again, reaching up to touch the wound, his life force leaking through his fingers.

Human, I realized.

I had dispersed the energy that made him different and returned him to his original mortality.

My mind was ready to spin with the sudden implications of the discovery. If I could do the same to non-djinn, it would change everything.

There was no time to give it any more thought. My defenses fell

beneath the magic assailing it, and the additional enemy forces moved in to join the fray.

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They approached us with swords drawn, ready to join the fight. Then the djinn who had been tangling with Adam noticed his companion slumped against the wall and bleeding to death. The entire complexion of the fight changed in an instant, the first djinn breaking off his attack and backing up toward the others.

“Sorcery,” he said, the fear tangible. “Dark magic.”

He spread his arms out, causing the rest of the group to come to a stop behind him.

“She didn’t tell us we would be killed,” he said out loud, to no one in particular.

“No,” the others said together. Then one of them moved next to the first.

“This is no longer fun, brother,” he said.

Djinn were powerful, immortal, and also immature. They existed to partake in vice. Drinking, gambling, sex. It was one thing to kill for sport when you didn’t think you could be killed back. It was another to watch one of your comrades die.

“What did she promise you?” I asked.

“Angels,” the djinn replied. “Beautiful young golden angels for our harem.”

I laughed. “She lied to you twice then.” I moved around Adam, approaching them with the blade. Now that my power was not coursing through it, the glow had returned to a soft blue.

“We have no wish to die,” the lead djinn said. “Not now. Please, leave our home.”

“Is she here?” I asked.

“No. She said we would destroy you and escape unharmed. That she had seen it happen.”

I looked back at Adam. My point was proven. Sarah believed too strongly in her visions. She had never learned to take them for the potential that they represented.

He shrugged, a dark, sheepish smile spreading across his face. I looked back to the djinn. I had been preparing for the worst. I had fought my way through their kind before, but it hadn’t been easy, and I wasn’t thrilled with the idea of doing it again. I was glad I wouldn’t have to.

“Show me the way out,” I said. “I have what I came for.”

The lead djinn bowed to me and waved his hand. They all turned back the way they had come and led Adam and me up a steep, narrow stairwell and into their house proper. It was as would be expected. An abundance of colored rugs, statues, artwork, gold, gems and other finery decorated every inch of the place, along with silk beds, pillows, and brightly colored, translucent cloth, all of it stolen or won or captured over thousands of years. I paused when we passed by the current harem, tempted to free the girls I knew would be inside, most of whom would be slaves to the creatures. My hand tightened on the sword, which I didn’t trust the djinn enough to risk putting away or letting leave my grip. I said nothing and did nothing in the end. If I failed in the rest of my tasks, I would be leaving them to an even worse fate.

We finally reached the entrance to the home. The djinn had thinned out as we walked, leaving only the one who had attacked Adam by the time we got there.

“Bar your doors as best you can,” I said to him as he put his hand to the side of the wall. It shimmered and faded, opening us up to the outside world. We were in the rainforest for sure. I could hear the calls of parrots, see the thick vegetation, and feel the humidity as it began to pour in. “When she finds out you let me go,

she won't be happy."

"We can protect ourselves, sorcerer," the djinn replied.

I didn't respond to his attitude. I moved out into the open air, turning as I cleared the entrance. It had already vanished back into the trunk of a large tree.

"That was interesting," Adam said, standing beside me. "How did you do what you did to that djinn?"

"I can disperse energy," I said. "Release it back into the universe. When the sword got stuck on him, I figured that might get it free. The side effect was unexpected." I felt my heart begin to beat a little more rapidly. Unexpected, and potentially valuable. If I could do the same to Sarah, I could save her from herself without having to take her life.

Of course, I didn't know if it would work on true Divine. There was only one way to find out.

"So, now what?" he said. "You came to rescue me for a reason. I'd love to know what it is."

"I got you out of there, and away from Sarah. You owe me. If you want back in His good graces, you'll do your best to help me out, no tricks."

He scowled a little but nodded. "No tricks."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry about your girlfriend."

"Don't ever talk about her, Landon," he snapped. "You have no idea."

I didn't press the issue. "I need you to tell me everything you know about the Fist of God."

"Why?"

"Gervais and a son of Lucifer have control of one of them. They want to use it against Sarah, and then to begin waging war against everything until they've satisfied their hunger for power."

"They're demons," Adam said. "They can never satisfy their hunger for power."

"Exactly. The son of Satan, Zifah, is able to control the Fist remotely without any obvious electronics. I need a way to either take control of the Fist myself or to interrupt his signal."

"I'm not well-versed in things of such a technical nature."

"You helped design the Fist."

"Matthias did all of the engineering, but thanks to you Matthias is dead."

Ouch. "You didn't keep records anywhere? Schematics?

Anything?”

Adam considered. “In the beginning, Matthias didn’t know what he was working on. The entire project was skunkworks, top secret and classified. Yeah, I’m sure he had a backup, but it could be that Gervais already got his hands on it. That may be how they figured out the means to control it.”

It was possible. Likely, even. The demon could kill anyone, and become anyone in the process, with all of their thoughts, memories, and knowledge. It would be easy for him to get in somewhere and get the intel he needed. The bigger question was if he would be able to destroy it?

“Where would the most likely location for a backup be?”

“I know the communication tech was earmarked for use in American military combat drones,” Adam said. “There were other engineers from DoD-funded companies working on that portion of the project. The U.S. has a number of data centers throughout the country.” He paused. “But if you want to be able to access all of it, I would say hacking the Pentagon would be your safest bet.”

The Pentagon. Right.

I guess it was a good thing I knew someone who not only used to be in the military but also knew his way around a network.

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I was nervous, standing outside Obi's room in the hospital. I wasn't in love with the idea of dragging him back into this thing, especially this soon, but what choice did I have?

"Time's wasting," Adam said beside me.

I had bamfed from the Congo back to Mexico, grabbed the fallen angel some new clothes, and then transported us here, where I had stood and hesitated going in to ask for my friend's help once more.

Mainly because I knew he would give it.

I was about to open the door and make my way in when the door opened from the other side. Obi was in front of me a moment later, a look of surprise taking over his face.

"Landon?" he said. "What are you doing here, man?"

He wouldn't remember fighting the Fist, or taking the hit. He likely woke up in the hospital, already healed by the seraphim.

His eyes fell on Adam, narrowing immediately. "You son of a-"

"Obi, wait," I said, getting between them. "Don't."

"What the heck do you mean, don't? What is he doing here, man? After what he helped Sarah do."

“I helped Sarah kill demons,” Adam said. “That’s what angels do. We kill demons.”

“Brian wasn’t a demon, you asshole.”

“He was close enough.”

Obi lunged toward Adam. To the orderlies in the hall, it looked like a muscular black guy going after a one-armed man. In other words, it didn’t look good.

“Obi,” I said, pushing him back with my power. “Use your head.”

He paused, scowling. “Why is he here?”

“The Fist. He’s the only link we’ve got.”

“Damn. I should have guessed.”

“You should know, Sarah turned on him, too. He was being held by a group of djinn.”

“She’s got djinn helping her?”

“Not so much, anymore.”

“I didn’t know about the Mass,” Adam said. “She used me.”

“Why would I believe that?”

“I don’t care if you believe me, but it’s true.”

“Whatever.”

“Can we focus?” I said.

“Okay,” Obi said, standing down somewhat. “Do I have you to thank for this stay? I can’t remember anything since Mexico.”

“You got hit by the Fist. He broke a bunch of your ribs. The seraphim took care of you.”

He smiled. “I remember one of them coming to me when I was half out of it. She was a dream.” He snapped out of it. “So you were watching over me while I healed? That’s sweet, man.”

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “I was bailing Adam out. I learned a new trick in the meantime. I may be able to stop Sarah without killing her.”

“That’s great news.”

“It’s still a pretty big maybe. Right now, we need to try to get our hands on the documentation for the communication system Matthias built for the Fist. If we can figure out how Zifah’s controlling it, maybe we can break his control.”

“I thought he was using his power to boss it around?”

“He probably is, but it has to be receiving the commands somehow. Rebecca is a prisoner inside the thing, not a willing participant.”

“And there is only one way for it to receive commands, regardless of how the source is generated,” Adam said. “I know that much.”

“What do you know about military datacenters?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow and stared at me. “Say what?”

“Department of Defense security protocols, black hat hacking, you know, that sort of thing?”

“No way, man,” he said, shaking his head. “Can’t you get Alichino to hack the Pentagon for you?”

He had before, but there was a limit to what he could accomplish. “What level of clearance was the FOG program?” I asked Adam.

“Top Secret. We didn’t want the tech falling into the wrong hands.”

Obi laughed at that. “Nice work, then.”

Adam glared.

“The point is that kind of clearance is going to require a little more finesse than Alichino can provide,” I said. “Social engineering from someone who knows people.”

He bit his lip, considering. “If I can get into an account with high enough clearance, I might be able to find a way through. But man, if I get caught, it’s going to be that soldier’s life that gets completely messed up. Someone who trusted me, or at least in the ideals of the system.”

“That’s easy enough to solve,” I replied. “Don’t get caught.”

He looked like he wanted to hit me, and I didn’t blame him. I was asking a lot. Just coming back to him after the Fist had nearly killed him was asking a lot.

“What do you say?” I asked.

He sighed, clearly resigned to his fate as my sidekick.

“Let’s do it.”

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I brought us back to Mexico, leaving Obi with Alichino to work out the details of their planned electronic break-in. For as much power as I had gained from Raguel, Dante, Srizyl, and the djinn, all of the globe-hopping was starting to leave me feeling the drain. We didn't have any time to waste, and I wouldn't have considered trying to rest if it weren't for the fact that when it came to hacking government systems, I was a miserable failure.

Then again, my hacking days had been limited to pre-written scripts and fast-talking. Obi's skills were far more advanced and far less likely to be detected. I winced at the thought of the days I had spent in prison, all of those years ago when I was still a mortal. If I had only known what my afterlife would become back then.

I fell onto my bed, the one I had intended to share with Alyx. I stared up at the ceiling. It was mirrored so that Espanto could see every part of whatever happened in here from whatever position he was in. The idea of watching yourself was nauseating to me, and I reached out with my power, putting pressure on the glass until it cracked into a thousand pieces. Then I looked over each of the

slivers, catching my reflection there. Some people theorized there was a new dimension for every decision every person made, an infinite number of timelines that stretched infinitely across time and space. It was a mind-boggling concept, and as I stared up at the hundreds of me, I wondered if I was looking into those other places, getting a glimpse of who I would be if I had done things differently at any one of a thousand points in my life.

The funny thing was, every one of them looked the same.

I closed my eyes. In theory, I didn't need to sleep. In truth, I had always found it helped restore me, if only because I didn't have to worry for a while. I drifted off in a hurry.

I woke to someone shaking my arm. I opened my eyes, looked over, and saw Alichino standing there.

"Hey boss, we're ready."

I slid off the bed and trailed behind Alichino, back to the control center where I found Obi and Adam standing over a workstation. Obi was wearing a headset.

"What's the play?" I asked.

"Okay, so Allie got me hooked up with a line onto the Pentagon intranet," Obi said, pointing at his monitor. "He's got a login, too, but the clearance isn't high enough to get to the goods. So, I'm planning on giving Ms. Cecilia Jackson a call. She's the secretary for Colonel James Lamont. I served under him in the middle east fifteen years ago, and the guys always told me I did a spot-on impression of him."

"You're going to try to get her to give up his credentials?" I asked.

"Yeah. I already tried his birthday and all that crap, but he's too smart for that."

"Why would she know them?"

"Because that's how Colonel Lamont is. He wouldn't trust writing something like that down. He would give it to a second source he felt he could trust."

"Even though it leaves them open to this sort of thing?"

"Anyone working under Lamont is going to be a tough nut to crack. That's where the impression comes in. Either she believes she's talking to the Colonel, or we get nowhere."

"And you're sure Lamont's not the guy Gervais used to get himself in?" I asked.

"Yes," Adam replied. "I already had Alichino check it out. You

probably won't be surprised to hear that a General Weston was found murdered in his home a few months back?"

"The murder, no. A few months? That would predate Matthias' death."

"I know," Adam said. "It seems like Gervais had been watching me for a while. He knew quite a bit about the program."

"That asshole. He led me into thinking he didn't know what the Fist was."

"Playing both sides, waiting for his moment," Obi said. "Sounds just like him."

"And you're sure he isn't in the office today?"

"I called him already. I asked him if he were in New York because I was thinking about him and wanted to see if we could meet. He said he's in Los Angeles for a speaking engagement." Obi smiled. "He remembered me like he had seen me yesterday."

"Okay. It sounds like we're ready. Do what you're going to do. Let's see what we can get."

Obi nodded and then tapped a key on his workstation.

"We're spoofing Lamont's caller id," Alichino said. "That was my idea."

Obi put a finger to his lips. He looked completely relaxed, but I knew he was feeling the pressure internally. The last thing he would want would be for his former XO to take any heat over this.

"Hi Cecilia," Obi said, adding a couple of octaves to his voice and gaining a southern drawl. "How are you today?" He paused while she spoke. "Good to hear. How are the kids?" He paused again. "Great, great, great. Oh, Maggie? She's fine. Just fine. Thanks for asking. Hey, listen, Cecilia, I was just firing up my laptop so I could grab a copy of the slide deck I've been working on for this here gig, and I'll be damned if I can remember my password. Yeah, yeah, I know. Losing my head in my old age."

He laughed raucously. I tried to imagine what the Colonel was like in real life. Probably a real ass-kicker.

"I know, I know, the channel's not secure. I'll tell you what, can you text it over to me? End-to-end encryption. No spies except maybe our own boys in the NSA." He laughed again. "You have the number right?" He paused. "Yeah, that's it. I appreciate it, Cecelia. Okay. I'll call you back if I have any trouble. Have a great day."

He pressed a button on the workstation and the phone hung up.

"Text you the password?" I asked.

Alichino smiled. “The pièce de résistance, Landon.”

A bubble popped up on the workstation, with only the password in it.

“How?” I said.

“Espanto has some very cool toys,” Obi said. “Including a back door into every major utility in the country. We hijacked his cell number for a few minutes.”

“What if he were on the phone?” I asked.

Obi shrugged. “There’s always some risk.”

“Well, you’ve got the password. Now what?”

“Now we try to get the files. We’ve already routed our traffic through a VPN in LA that should be close enough to trick any auditors into thinking we really are Lamont’s laptop. Unfortunately, we don’t know his MAC address to fake that, too, or I’d feel even more comfortable.”

He returned to the portal and typed in the password from the text. Then he was into the main Department of Defense index. There was a search field in the top-right corner, and he typed in ‘Project Fog.’

Nothing came up.

“Hmm,” Obi said, looking over. “Maybe Gervais was able to delete it? That doesn’t make sense, though. This kind of thing should be read-only once it’s submitted.”

I thought about it. “Project Fog was the codename at Taylor Heavy Industry. But you said the Pentagon didn’t have the entire project under their wing.”

Adam nodded. “That’s right. Only specific portions.”

“What was the command module called?”

Adam shook his head. “I don’t remember.”

“You have to remember.”

He considered, tapping his fingers on the side of the cubicle.

“The longer I sit here, the more suspicious it looks,” Obi said.

“Oh, I know,” Adam said. “Amplified Neural Gateway for External Logistics.”

“Angel?” Obi said. “You couldn’t remember that?”

“Falling from Heaven takes a lot out of you,” Adam said in defense.

“That’s your own damn fault,” Obi replied.

Adam looked like he wanted to start with the former Marine again. A glare from me got him to step away.

“Here we are,” Obi said, getting a single result on the hit. He clicked on it, opening up a document that was over a thousand pages in length. “I’m going to download it so we can get offline. I just hope the security team doesn’t ask Lamont what he needed it for.”

The PDF downloaded quickly. As soon as it was done, Obi signed out of the account, passed the document to Espanto’s internal network, and shut off the workstation completely. Then he leaned back in his chair as though he had just finished a marathon.

“That was easy,” I said.

He turned his head to glare at me with his shut-the-hell-up face.

“I’m printing it now,” Alichino said. “Give me a few hours with it and I’ll figure something out.”

“Thanks, Allie,” I said. “I’m going to head out for some reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements?” Obi asked, leaning forward.

“Yup.”

It was time to bring Alyx back into the game.

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Once Alichino found a way to stop the signal to the Fist, or to otherwise disable the link between Zifah and the armor, we would need a means to bring them to us so we could actually use it. Since I had sent Alyx off with her sister to keep her bright red, Great Were aura from giving my position away, it made sense that I would take her back to do the opposite.

Sure, there was a risk that Sarah would latch onto the signal and go on the offensive, but she knew that thanks to Dante I could get away any time I wanted to. She also knew that eventually, one way or another, I wouldn't want to. The idea of it created a number of subsequent thoughts and questions that swirled around my head. Mainly, I wondered how her visions had reacted to my escape from the djinn? If she had truly believed I was supposed to end there, how would her farseeing abilities spin what had really happened?

I didn't have too much time to consider it. Within a few minutes of leaving Obi, I was standing on the front porch of Onyx's house on the French countryside. It was early morning. I could hear roosters crowing in the distance. I could smell waffles and eggs and bacon

cooking inside the house, and for a moment I thought I had gone to the wrong place.

Alyx was at the door a moment later, her entire face lighting up when she saw me. She opened the door and rushed to me, taking me in her arms.

"You're back," she said.

I accepted her embrace, leaning down to kiss her. She returned the affection with a chastity that surprised me.

"We were just having breakfast. Do you want to come in?"

I nodded, a little dumbstruck. Alyx was wearing a long black dress with long sleeves that covered ninety percent of her body. It was a massive shift from her formerly provocative dress.

She headed back for the door.

"Alyx, wait," I said.

She paused and turned back to me.

"Yes?"

"I didn't come for breakfast. I need you to come back with me. It isn't over yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Gervais and Zifah are still out there with the Fist. Sarah is still out there. I have a plan to remove Gervais from the equation, but I can't do it without you."

She stared at me for a long moment. I could sense a change in her, one that confused me, and sent a wave of anxiety up my gut.

"No," she said.

"What?" I replied, not sure what else to say.

"I can't help you, Mast…. Landon. I don't want to fight anymore."

"You're a Great Were."

Her eyes narrowed. "So what? I am a demon, and so I have to fight? Is that what you're saying?"

Yes. Sort of.

"Uh, no," I replied. "Alyx, I really need you."

"I don't want to fight anymore. I won't fight anymore."

"Al-"

"Do you not understand no, Landon?" she snapped. "Or do I only have the right to decide as long as it's in line with what you want?"

I closed my mouth and didn't speak. It was like she was a completely different person.

“What happened to you?” I asked a moment later.

“You ask me that like not wanting to fight is a bad thing. Like all I should be is a monstrous killing machine.”

That was what I needed right now. It was clear I wasn’t going to get that.

“No. It’s definitely not a bad thing. It’s just, you’ve changed so much, so quickly. I’m trying to understand you because at this moment I feel like I don’t know you at all.”

She softened a little. “You were the one who started me on this path. You were the one who told me that I could change. That I could be different than what my background made me or said I was. When I took Onyx home, I saw how much pain she was in. How much the death of her mate was hurting her. They didn’t go out looking for a fight. They were trying to help you. Now she is devastated. After I got her settled and resting, I came outside, and do you know what I did?”

“No.”

“I prayed. For hours, I prayed. To understand what she was feeling. To understand what I was feeling, and who I am supposed to be.” She smiled. “And He answered me. God answered me. I would never have believed it. He told me I was whatever I wanted to be, and that a creature of Satan could be a daughter of God if only they live His word in their heart. That is what I am trying to do. That is what I want to do. Nothing you can say will change my mind on that.”

“The angels fight demons,” I said. “It isn’t wrong for you to fight evil. God is supporting me in this.” I drew Uriel’s sword from my back to show it to her. “The archangel Uriel gave me this sword in Heaven, to help make things right.”

She stared at the blade, and I could tell she was thinking about it. I didn’t care if she wanted to fight for Heaven. I just needed her to fight.

“No,” she said at last, crushing that hope again. “I can’t. The idea of it makes me feel sick. It makes me feel guilty and wrong. If you love me, you won’t keep asking.”

I stared at her blankly, a part of me feeling betrayed. She had promised to be my ally. To protect me. Now that I was asking her to make good, she was balking. For all the right reasons, sure, but right reasons wouldn’t mean anything if Sarah destroyed all of the Divine.

I had another idea.

"Alyx, I understand. There is another way you can help me."

She seemed pleased with my acquiescence. "What is it?" she asked.

"The sword can draw the energy from any Divine and transfer it to me. Normally, it destroys the target in the process, but I've discovered that I can use my power to change the outcome, and instead of killing, change them back to mortal instead." I swallowed hard, knowing that I was about to ask a lot of her, and also knowing that I wasn't even sure if the trick would work on non-djinn. "If you don't plan on fighting anymore, I could really use your power."

She looked at me as if I had just slapped her in the face.

"What?" she said, giving me an opportunity to change my stance.

I froze. I wasn't expecting things to go this way. "You don't need it anymore," I said. "Not if you're going to spend the rest of your life as a pacifist."

She shook her head sadly as if she felt sorry for me. "I can't believe you would even ask me this."

"I'm only asking because I'm desperate," I said. "Please?"

"My power is part of who I am. It is the only reason I exist in the first place."

"Right now it is. But Alyx, your power makes you immortal. If you never die, you can never go to Heaven. If I make you human, fully human, you'll age. You'll die. And then you'll have a chance."

It was the one card I had to play that might sway her, and by her expression, I knew that I had played it well. She stood in front of me, her face flat, her eyes thoughtful.

Finally, she let me down again.

"No. This is who I am."

I felt my heart clench along with my teeth. My hand tightened on the hilt of Uriel's sword. She was close enough; I could stab her with it before she could defend herself, take her power and render her mortal. In the end, it would be the best thing for her. She could live a normal life as one of God's children, instead of the life of a demon.

I raised my arm slightly. She noticed the motion, and her eyes widened slightly. Still, she didn't move.

"I don't know if I'm going to succeed," I said, lowering the

blade. I wouldn't take it from her against her will, like Espanto did.

"I'm sorry," she replied.

I believed her. She was trying to find herself, the same way I had always been. I couldn't fault her for that. If the world burned because of her decision, at least she would know it was because she had used her free will.

We would both know that.

"If I don't see you again, take care of yourself," I said, putting the sword back in its sheath.

"You, too, Landon," she replied.

I stepped forward and embraced her again. I held her for a few heartbeats. Then she leaned up and kissed my cheek. Her eyes were moist. So were mine.

There was no reason for me to stay. Not now.

So I didn't.

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“Where’s Alyx?” Obi asked as I made my way back into the control center.

I had been gone for a while, having made my way back to the beach where I had spent the better part of two years pining for Charis and Clara, and steeling myself for the next chapter of my journey, a chapter that I had a feeling was nearing its end. Alyx’s rebuttal was the most unexpected thing I could have encountered, and it not only hurt me emotionally, but it also left me feeling less than positive about, well, about everything. I felt like a boxer who had gone ten rounds and was hanging from the ropes on the verge of being KO’ed.

“She found God,” I said.

What else could I say? I had thought the Big Guy was on my side, but then He had stolen one of my best weapons right out from under me. Was I supposed to do this alone? I had heard the expression that God never gives people more than they can handle.

I was ready to call bullshit on that one.

“Found God?” Obi asked.

“She won’t fight. That’s the bottom line. We have to do this without her.”

His face fell. “I’m sorry, man.”

“That’s the hand we’ve been dealt. We need to work around it. Is Alichino making progress?”

“Why don’t you ask Alichino?” the demon said, appearing beside me. Adam was a few steps behind. “And yes, the demon has been making very good progress.” He pointed back at the fallen angel, who was sporting a new arm.

I shivered at the sight of it, my memory of our first encounter still fresh. His new arm wasn’t as advanced as the first had been; it was more of a metal frame with some exposed wires and circuits poking into the stump of his flesh. That didn’t mean it was incapable.

“A remote device would have been better,” I said.

“The design requires Divine energy to function,” Adam said. “And a direct interface to the nervous system.”

“No offense, but how do I know I can trust you?”

“I want to go back to Heaven, Landon,” he said. “More than I want to kill you, which you should be thankful for. Making right what I did wrong is my best chance of doing so.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Are we sure this thing will work?”

“Not at all,” Alichino said. “There’s no way to test it ahead of time.”

“But it will give us control of the Fist?”

“Complete control? I doubt it. It will interfere with Zifah’s signal, and compete with it. That kind of confusion should be enough for you to take the demon by surprise and put him out of commission.”

“How long will it keep it confused for?”

“There are a lot of factors at play. Too many to guess.”

“Ballpark?”

“Five seconds.”

“That’s it?”

“It could be longer,” Alichino said. “I wouldn’t put my life on any more than that.”

“Wonderful. Okay, well, we’re down one Great Were. I’m open to ideas on how to attract Gervais’ attention without bringing Sarah down on us at the same time.”

“Already done,” Obi said. “You didn’t need your girlfriend to

bring him in. He's making plenty of noise on his own."

He turned his monitor so I could see it. He had a few windows open to different news feeds, all of which were reporting incidents of non-minimal proportions occurring around the center of London, all of them vague on causes and ranging from terrorist attacks to general accidents. It was classic Divine intervention, in the worst sense of the term, the general chaos and destruction fitting the profile of the Fist. With so many other Divine in hiding, it was a clear signal to anyone who cared to hear it.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked.

"A couple of hours," Obi replied.

"Sarah's bound to see that, too."

"Maybe Gervais is hoping as much."

"He's not ready to fight her," I said.

"Even with the Fist?" Adam asked.

"He wanted the sword for a reason."

"To level up," Obi said. "But what if he's decided to be satisfied to try and talk her into joining him. At least in the short term."

"No. He must have decided that the Fist can take her. If it does,Gervais has another way of stealing her power." It was too disgusting to think about, but it was still possible.

"We can't stop her from getting involved," Obi said.

"Do we have any idea where she is right now?" I said.

"Negative," Alichino replied. "Not in London, or we would."

"She could get there any second," Adam said.

"We can get there faster." I turned to Obi. "I understand if you want to sit this one out."

He shook his head forcefully. "No. No way, man. You know there's not a chance I'm stepping out of this action. It takes more than a few broken ribs to keep me down." He smiled. "Besides, if I get beat up again you can send that angel to come and fix me. She was like a… well, like an angel." He laughed.

"I know better than to argue," I said. I turned to Adam. "We need to get the timing right on this. Stay up and out of sight, and keep a close eye on me. Don't trigger the system until I'm close. Five seconds isn't a long time, and I expect Zifah will put up a fight of his own."

"A reasonable expectation," Adam said. "I'll monitor the situation from the air, and be ready."

"Don't double-cross me, Adam," I said. "If you try, I swear you'll

regret it."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

"Good. Put your hands in."

I put my hand out. Obi slapped his down on top of mine, followed by Adam and Alichino.

"On three. Keep your hand in," I said.

"Wait," Alichino said. "Landon, I'm not a fighter."

"Then you're a distraction," I said. "We need all the bodies we have."

He used his free hand to wave to the command center crew. "What about them?"

I ignored him, grabbing his hand when he tried to pull it away.

"On three," I repeated. "One."

"Two," Adam said.

"Three," Obi said.

I blinked.

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The news reports would say that the damage done to London was the result of a natural gas explosion or a similar horrible accident.

I knew as soon as we arrived that it was the work of demons. Not only Gervais and Zifah but also some other recruits they must have gathered from somewhere. Fiends with control over hellfire who had used it to turn the bottom of a skyscraper to slag.

We didn't get assaulted as soon as we arrived. Maybe if Alyx had been there. Instead, we moved as a group away from the first building, where mortal emergency crews were trying to clean up the mess, crossing a few streets in search of the demons.

“I'll see if I can spot them,” Adam said before launching into the sky.

“Adam, wait,” I tried to say. Too late. His dark wings lifted him like a bullet. I silently cursed him as he vanished. That wasn’t the way to earn back my trust.

“I think I’m going to go look over there,” Alichino said, pointing back the way we had come, where a crowd of mortal onlookers proved there were no Divine nearby.

“I don’t think so,” I said, grabbing him. “If anything comes after you, lead them toward me, and I’ll finish them off.”

He looked terrified at the idea of being chased but nodded.

We covered a few more blocks. Obi pulled out his cell, checked the BBC, and then pointed us toward the river.

“Report of a malfunction with the Eye,” he said.

We headed that way, getting in view of the Eye a minute later. At first, I didn’t see anything wrong with the massive Ferris wheel.

Then I saw the Fist of God standing on top of it.

“That’s a problem,” Obi said.

A big problem. The people on the ride had nowhere to go, and so they couldn’t escape the battle that was to come. A quick scan of the ground told me that they had all been abandoned to that fate.

“At least we found them,” I said, reaching under my coat and bringing out Uriel’s sword. I looked skyward in search of Adam, not finding him.

Had that son of a bitch abandoned us?

I didn’t try to do anything subtle. That wasn’t going to help here. Instead, I made a straight line toward the massive structure. I had seen the Eye get destroyed in movies before. I hoped not to make that a reality.

I heard the parting of air before I saw the vampires that jumped us, dropping down from the building to our right and falling into our midst. It was almost a joke for Gervais to start with the creatures. I was pretty solid against them before, and unstoppable against them now.

I danced among them, their scratching claws and biting teeth a blur as I used all of the moves I had gained from Josette’s memories, letting my muscles take over as I fed my power to them. I swept in low, bringing the blade up and slicing one of the vamps nearly in half, sucking the power from it as I did. It barely registered a prick on the pain scale its overall Divine energy was so weak. I did a neat pirouette-style maneuver from that one, using the back of a second vamp for balance as I came about, stabbing another of the creatures and taking its power as well.

I broke free for a moment, my eyes landing on Obi. He was in the midst of a pair of the demons, a smile on his face. One came in at him, and he caught its arm in his glove, causing a satisfying hiss of steam and sulfur as he pulled it to him and punched it in the face, knocking it down and out. The second pounced, and Obi

recovered, bringing his arm up, grabbing it by the neck, and throwing it easily aside.

"Landon," Alichino said, doing as I had asked, running from the vampire that chased him. He slipped between my legs, and the demon wound up impaled on my blade.

I felt a wash of heat, as a gout of hellfire caught me by surprise, searing my flesh on the left side. I grunted in pain, pushing myself back and away and taking the opportunity to heal. Hellfire had always been more challenging to recover from, but now I swept it aside easily as if it were no more than regular fire. I had always been afraid of having too much power, and it was easy for me to recognize why.

I felt invincible.

I came back down, throwing my power out at the fiend, grabbing him with it and pulling him toward me. He was still in the air when I cut through him with the blade, capturing his power as he fell to the ground behind me. That time there was more of a sting, but nothing I could manage.

"Bravo," I heard Gervais say, followed by sarcastic clapping. "Bravo, mon frere."

I scanned the field. The demons were all gone, save for the French fop. He was standing alone ahead of the Eye, looking very pleased with himself.

I glanced up at the sky again, looking for Adam. Judging by Gervais' reaction, I had a bad feeling the fallen angel was working with him. Was his line about getting back in God's good graces all a bunch of bullshit? It wouldn't surprise me.

"Why are you getting mortals involved?" I asked, pointing back at the Eye. I glanced at the scared faces of the passengers. They likely didn't see Divine. What did they see?

"Why not?" he asked. "I figured upping the stakes would keep you from running. You see, if you leave, they die."

It made sense in a typically demonic way.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, noticing he still had a scar on his face where Srizyl had burned him.

"Good. I owe you for this, Landon. Among many other things."

If he knew about Adam, he wasn't showing it. But then, why play his hand too early?

"I'm right here. Where's Zifah?"

"Doing what he does best, I'm afraid," Gervais said. "Hiding."

The Fist appeared beside me, its wrist blades extended. I brought Uriel's sword up in time to block the first series of strikes, stepping back as I maneuvered.

Game on.

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It came at me in a blur, twin blades hacking and slashing toward me as I moved away, frantically angling my own blade to block the attack. I saw Obi move in behind it and make to punch it in the back, only to have Gervais change into his super-vampire mode and tackle him. They rolled on the ground together until Obi managed to throw him off, getting to his feet and squaring up against the demon.

"Alichino, see if you can find Zifah,' I shouted to the harlequin demon. He looked at me like I was crazy and then ran off toward the shadows.

Demons. Sigh.

I threw my power out at the Fist. Its scripture flared, reducing the power. It was still enough to drive it back, to buy me a little more breathing room. I teleported as it closed the gap again, moving a couple dozen feet behind it. It turned, raising its arm to fire its bolts.

They launched at me, the Fist vanishing the moment the rounds cleared it.

I dove to the side, rolling to my feet as the bolts hit the wall behind me. The Fist appeared right ahead of me, an armored hand slamming into my face and sending me airborne, ten feet back and onto the street.

It appeared right above me, swords ready to come down. I tried to look past it for Adam. If there was ever a time for him to do his thing, it was now.

I felt a hand grab my collar and pull me along the ground, bringing me clear of the blades as they dug into the cement where I had just been.

"Close call," Obi said, turning and slapping one of Gervais' claws aside. I threw myself to my feet, hitting the demon with my power as I did and sending him tumbling back.

The Fist vanished.

"Where the hell is Adam?" I said, getting more pissed at him with each passing second.

"He must have left, man. There's no other way to explain it. First chance he got to get away from you, he took it."

"No matter what happens here, I'm going to find that asshole, and I'm going to cut his damn throat."

"One thing at a time."

The Fist materialized behind Obi, its sword arm already moving forward to stab him in the back. My reaction was instant, tugging at my friend with my power while pushing against the Fist. I managed to create just enough distance to keep him from being skewered.

The Fist disappeared once more.

Gervais was close by, and he came at Obi again. I grabbed him with my power before he could, lifting him and throwing him like a ragdoll, sending him hurtling through the air. He went through the wall of the Eye's ticketing booth and landed with a crash.

The distraction worked, the Fist appearing beside me, wrapping massive arms around me and lifting me in a tight bear hug. I strained against it, pushing power to my muscles and fighting back, trying to break the hold. Its scripture flared, fighting against my power, meeting it with imbued Divine energy of its own. Obi moved in, hitting the Fist with his gloves. They were useless against it, and it ignored him.

I felt a rush of cold air as the Fist vanished, bringing me with it to wherever it was going.

I stopped struggling for a moment, my heart feeling as though it

had stopped.

We were somewhere between realms. Somewhere that time seemed to slow. I felt the stillness of it. The loneliness of it. The silence.

The armor had turned translucent, like bright sigils on a pane of frosted glass. Through it, I could see a face.

Rebecca's face.

It was twisted in pain, the eyes sadder than anything I had ever seen.

The Fist continued to apply the pressure, to crush me in the place outside of time where it could destroy me before anyone could intervene. I pushed my power against it, harder and harder, to no avail. Gervais had done what he had intended to do all along. To catch me with the Fist. To trap me here where he knew I couldn't escape. To end me, and perhaps to leave my body here for eternity.

The eyes shifted, looking at me. They changed slightly then. She could see me here. I knew she could.

"Rebecca," I mouthed, my lungs too compressed to put any air behind it. Was there even any air here to begin with?

She didn't respond. She only continued to look. She was in pain. So much pain. It hurt me to see her like this. Even after all that she had done, it was hard to know she was hurting this bad.

I gathered my power, pushing back even harder than before. I felt some of the pressure against me ease for a moment, letting go as though I were finally shifting the balance of power. A few heartbeats later it was gone, and I heard and felt one of my ribs crack.

I cried out. In pain. In anger. In frustration. In hurt and loss. To have fought so hard and have it end like this? It hardly seemed fair.

Nothing was fair.

I pushed even harder, the strain of the power making my body feel as though it were on fire. Again, the pressure eased, and I managed to grab a single breath before it returned. It was enough to delay the inevitable, that was all.

Except, the Fist was moving, running through the landscape between time and space, crossing the mortal realm in an instant. It went right through a solid wall and into a small clothes boutique where Zifah was standing.

Alichino had a single sharp finger to the demon's throat.

Somehow, he had not only found Satan's son, but he had managed to sneak completely up on him and take him by surprise, causing the demon to summon his protector.

It paused in front of the scene, squeezing even harder. Zifah knew he could kill me and then save himself as long as he was ready. And he was ready. I could feel my body weakening, and my vision was beginning to fade. I was going to die here unless I did something about it.

I looked at Rebecca again.

"Help me," I mouthed, hoping she could understand but expecting nothing.

Her eyes narrowed, shifting enough that I thought for a moment that maybe she had heard, and maybe she would react.

"Yes," she mouthed back.

The Fist fell from the interim realm, back into mortal time. Zifah screeched a little in surprise at the momentary loss of control, recovering in an instant, the Fist hitting Alichino so hard he went through the boutique window steaming, crushed by the scriptured gauntlets.

It had to release me to do so, and I tumbled to the floor, desperately trying to recover from the episode. Uriel's blade fell beside me, out of my hand. The Fist stepped on it before I could pull it back, holding it in place.

Zifah jumped onto my chest, one of his poisoned needles in his grip.

"You almost had me, Landon," he said. "Almost."

Something large and dark hit the window and barreled through in a flash of hair and feathers, slamming into the small demon and knocking him from me. It smashed into the chest of the Fist a moment later, hitting it like a steel wall. I heard Adam's bones crunch beneath the impact, and he slumped to the floor at its feet, halfway between it and me.

"What the hell was that?" Zifah said, reappearing on the boutique's counter a moment later, and then putting his eyes on Adam. "You? What happened to your arm?"

Adam glanced up at the demon. His face was bloody and broken, his wings bent at odd angles behind him. He looked like he was in agony, but he smiled anyway.

"This," he said.

The Fist stood straight up and froze.

“What?” Zifah said, immediately recognizing his loss of control.

Five seconds. That was all the time I had.

I only needed two.

With one motion, one massive push and pull, I yanked the sword from beneath the Fist, lifted myself, and blasted toward Zifah. He tried to get his arms up. He tried to run away.

He failed at both.

I grabbed him by the neck, carrying him as momentum brought us into the rear wall of the boutique and through, out into the alley behind it.

“Landon, please, don’t,” Zifah said. “We can still be friends.”

“I don’t think so,” I replied, stabbing Uriel’s blade into his chest.

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I fell back, screaming, as the power of a son of Satan began pouring into me. I could feel my body convulse, every limb superheating in an instant. I writhed on my feet, holding the blade inside the demon's gut, drawing in every last bit of power.

I stumbled as Zifah turned to dust, reaching out and grabbing the wall to brace myself.

I took a few heaving breaths and then made my way back into the boutique. The Fist was moving again, bending to lift Adam in its arms and turning toward me.

He didn't look good. His body was steaming, the scripture on the Fist causing him to burn. He stared at me, his eyes dim.

"I thought you left," I said.

"It wouldn't have done me any good to stop the Fist until you were close to Zifah," he replied. "I thought taking them by surprise would be best."

"Turns out it was. You didn't have to take me by surprise."

"I had to get back at you somehow."

He smiled. His body was burning away slowly. "Do you believe

in second chances, Landon?" he asked, eyeing Uriel's sword.

I nodded. A long time ago, I had needed a second chance as much as anyone.

"Would you?"

"You might die."

"Whatever happens, it has to be better than the alternative."

"Okay."

He closed his eyes as I drove the tip of Uriel's sword into his chest. I pushed my power into it, feeling his Divine energy gathering, and replacing it with something else. I still didn't know if the transfer would work on a real Divine.

As the process was completed, his body healed. Even the metal arm that had been affixed to him fell off, as a replacement limb sprouted from the stump. Finally, his red eyes turned blue once more. He shifted himself, falling from the Fist's cradling posture and standing in front of me.

"Did it work?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think it did," he replied, looking at his new arm. "Amazing."

"You wanted another shot to get back to Heaven," I said.

"You had better stop Sarah then, so I get to take it."

My attention was diverted by cursing outside the storefront. I slipped past Adam and the Fist, leaving the shop and finding Obi holding Gervais by the neck.

"You beat him?" I said.

"Don't sound so surprised, man," he replied. "I'm feeling pretty damn motivated right now." He looked past me. "Since that hunk of metal isn't moving, I assume you got Zifah?"

I could feel the demon's power rippling through me with the rest. I was quickly approaching god-mode if I hadn't reached it already.

"Yup."

I approached Gervais.

"All that planning. All that scheming. You lost again."

He glared up at me without speaking.

"You have ten seconds of existence left, and you have nothing to say?"

"I'll be back, Landon. I always come back."

"Not this time."

I shoved Uriel's sword into him, feeling the sharp bite as his

power transferred to me. I had never felt more satisfied with anything as I did watching him turn to ash in front of me.

"It seems a little anti-climactic," Obi said. "After all the shit he put you through."

"I don't need drama," I replied.

"You ready to take on Sarah?"

"Almost. Not quite."

He was surprised. "You need more power than that?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Then what is it?"

I turned back to where the Fist was standing with no one to control it. I approached it, gathering my power as I did. The scripture would protect it, but not enough. Not now. I reached out, wrapping my power around it and pulling. It came apart at the seams, ripping open in a bright flash of light as the sigils tried to protect it and failed.

The power allowed me to see her then, her form barely visible against the backdrop of the mortal realm.

"Rebecca, don't go," I said.

She looked at me, frightened.

"You've done a lot of bad things, but you've done a lot of good things, too," I said.

"I only wanted God to love me," she replied.

"You can't force it. You have to earn it."

"I tried."

"Over years. Over the course of a lifetime."

"It's too late. I've done too many things wrong."

"It isn't too late," I said, holding up Uriel's sword. "I can give you another chance. Do you want it?"

Her eyes welled with tears. "Yes," she said.

I jabbed the blade into her. I felt it gain purchase on her otherwise invisible form, my increased power allowing it to cross the space between this realm and that one. I fed my energy through it, changing hers, removing it and replacing it with a new form to house her soul. She materialized back into the real world, as naked as the day she was born.

"Oh, man," Obi said. "You look…well… live and learn, I guess. Good thing we're in a clothing store." He grabbed the nearest thing from one of the racks and handed it over.

Rebecca took it, clutching it in front of her, her face flushed

with embarrassment. The fact that she was embarrassed was a good sign.

"Thank you, Landon," she said. "I know I don't deserve this." Her eyes were wet, the tears rolling down her face.

"Make the most of it," I said. "You won't get any more chances."

"I know."

I turned to Obi. "Do you want me to leave you here with them, or drop you somewhere?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know where Sarah is," I said. "I know where every Divine on the planet is. I can feel them all. Sense them all."

"You're going to go to her?"

"No. She's going to come to me. But not here."

Obi looked at Adam and Rebecca. "I'll stay," he said. "These two will need a little help getting settled."

"Okay. In that case, wish me luck."

"Good luck, man," Obi said, stepping forward and man-hugging me.

I clapped him on the back, and then stepped away, looking over the three of them one last time.

Then I went somewhere else.

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The where was a split-second decision. I needed a place where there wouldn't be too many people, and where a battle between two powerful entities wouldn't cause a lot of collateral damage. At the same time, Sarah was still part mortal. She couldn't withstand the extreme temperatures of a place like Death Valley or the North Pole.

Instead, I ended up standing in the middle of the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. It was as good a place as any, and a better place because it was wide, open, and flat. I would be able to see Sarah coming from miles away, long before she arrived.

Not that it mattered. With my increase in power, I could already see Sarah coming. I could feel the power of every Divine in the mortal realm, and she was easy to spot. Her signature was different from all of the others. Instead of running hot or cold, she was even and plain, a white light instead of a colored one. Could she sense my power in return? Would she have continued approaching if she could?

She had said I was the problem, that my existence was throwing

the balance out of balance for as much as I attempted to steady it. So much of my experience over the last few months had proven it to be true. It was something I knew in my soul. Something I could feel. At the same time, I also knew now that my return to the fight had been necessary. I also had a niggling feeling that there was a higher power behind it. That God wasn't just on my side now, but that He had been on my side all along, even as the angels had sought to get rid of me with the Fist.

It was all conjecture, but standing out on the salted plains watching Sarah swoop in on wings of red and gold, I had the feeling He wanted me to fix what Gervais had broken.

He wanted me to stop Sarah, to return her to what she was always supposed to be, and in turn, make right all that had been wrong since Dante's decision first to send back Charis, and then me.

At least, that's what I was coming to believe.

"Brother," Sarah said, as she fell from the sky, landing smoothly a dozen feet away.

"Sarah," I replied. "Thanks for coming."

"You didn't leave me any choice."

"You had a choice. You could have come to London. You could have interfered there."

I didn't know why she hadn't. A vision, I assumed.

"Too many innocents," she replied. "Too many mortals in harm's way."

It wasn't the answer I was expecting, but I appreciated it. She wasn't a monster, not by mortal standards. She wasn't looking to kill regular men and women.

Only Divine.

"I don't want to fight you," I said.

"I don't want to fight you, either," she replied. "If you submit to me, if you allow me to do what I need to do, we don't have to."

"You know I can't do that. You'll destroy the mortal world. People need Heaven and Hell, even if they don't know it."

Her wings spread out wide behind her, the razor edges gleaming in the sunlight.

"Then let us-"

I hit her with my power. All of it with one blow. It pummeled into her, enough to knock her over, to send her sliding backward across the salt nearly a quarter of a mile. It wasn't meant to hurt her, not yet. It was meant to send a message.

She wasn't immune to my power anymore.

She returned to her feet, taking to the air and launching toward me like a bullet. I could feel the onrush of displacing air as she charged, and I gathered my power again, throwing it out like a net. I wrapped her up in it, turning and throwing her away from me. She shot aside again, tumbling end over end before regaining herself.

I drew Uriel's blade, holding it in front of me, waiting for her to strike again.

I didn't wait long. She swooped in, the speed of it breaking the sound barrier and causing a thunderous clap as she arrived. I pushed myself up and back, reaching the sky, closing the distance with her.

We were both airborne, locked in melee. Her wings served to both hold her aloft and make rapid strikes against me, while I held tight with my power, bringing it to bear to keep me skyward while parrying her attacks and looking for an opening.

Her left wing came in at my neck, and I slapped it aside while her right targeted my gut. I blocked that one too, caught by surprise as her fist came in, nearly hitting me in the nose. I faded from this realm to avoid it, becoming vapor just long enough to avoid the blow. She crinkled her eyebrows in surprise anger, flipping backward and coming to rest on the plains once more.

I followed behind, landing a few feet away.

"You put yourself at a severe disadvantage, letting me reach Gervais. I took Rebecca's power." I blinked from the mortal realm to that one for a moment. I didn't seem to be able to remain there to take advantage of the time difference, but it was still useful enough.

"Did I?" she asked.

I heard the rumble in the distance and realized my mistake.

I pushed out my power, circling it around me as a dozen missiles honed in on me, fired by the Nicht Creidem forces she had rallied. I had been so busy watching the Divine, I had neglected her allies in the fight, as well as the firepower they had to bear. Explosions rocked off my Divine shield, the force of it threatening my concentration. I found the beacon attached to my arm, planted there during the skyward duel and threw it to the ground. Then I teleported, crossing to the other side of the Flats in an instant.

I saw the helicopters in the distance, an entire squadron of them

approaching with Nicht Creidem on board.

The missiles had been little more than a distraction, what could they do?

I turned as Sarah swooped down on me, taking advantage of that distraction, barely getting my blade up in time to knock aside an approaching wing. She stepped up her assault, coming in faster and more furious than I could believe. I used my power to leap backward, keeping time with her offensive as the choppers continued closing in.

There was no respite from her assault. No time to do anything but defend. I ducked and jerked, blocked and dodged, in awe of her Divine energy while at the same time fearing that for all I had collected, it still wasn't enough. She continued coming, relentless in her pursuit, even as I began teleporting across the field.

She was fast, so fast, her wings carrying her to my new location within seconds, forcing me back into defense without a break. Her demonic side made her a natural born killer, a predator, a huntress.

The Nicht Creidem drew nearer, the choppers circling us. I could see the pilots watching us fight, ready to move at a moment's notice. What were they doing here? They couldn't shoot at me again without risking Sarah.

At least, that was what I thought before the bullet hit me.

It came as a single crack from one of the choppers. I saw the muzzle flash, and a moment later something big and heavy hit me in the chest, blasting right through me and causing flesh and bone to explode away. I cried out, falling back, losing my balance at the sniper's ambush. I fell to the ground as Sarah landed on top of me, her wings sweeping forward for the kill.

No. I wasn't going to go like that. I pushed just hard enough to slide away from her wings, rolling through the air to my feet and facing her again, throwing out my power in a massive shield that put the Nicht Creidem outside of the fight. I pushed more of the power to my wound, knitting my shell back together in an instant.

I raised my blade in front of me and looked at Sarah. Her eyes were red. Evil. Whatever she had seen, whatever logic she thought she was following, it had fallen by the wayside. Her desire to destroy had overcome all of it. It had turned her into the creature that Gervais had always wanted her to be. The one that he knew could cause the entire world to burn.

And that's what she would do if I fell to her. She would destroy

the Divine, and in her fury she would destroy humankind as well. It didn't matter if I knew how to stop her without killing her. I knew by her face that I had to stop her any way I could.

"Do you even know who you are anymore?" I asked, feeling nothing but sorry for her. She hadn't chosen any of this.

"A monster," she replied. "We are both monsters."

She came at me again, a blur of wings and hands and feet, integrating her other appendages into the assault. I did the same, using every move Josette had ever known, circling her within the globe of protection I had created, doing everything I could to keep that shield up and prevent another unwelcome surprise.

We moved back and forth, around and around in our deadly dance, so quickly that the salt at our feet began to swirl around behind us, pressing up against my barrier and leaving us like a scene in a massive snowglobe. We twirled and lunged, pounced and retreated, in a ritual too fast for human eyes to follow, releasing so much Divine power it seemed to me that the world would break.

And then, finally, came that singular instance where everything came together, the point where the most balanced battle in the universe reached its final, almost predictable end.

I don't know how long we had been at it for. I know the sun was up when we started, and down when it was finished. I know the Nicht Creidem had long since landed their choppers before they ran out of fuel and crashed. I know that it happened when I stepped an inch too far to the right in blocking one of her attacks, leaving a micro-millisecond opening on my left side. Her wing slashed into my gut, piercing through and holding. I cried out in pain, and at the same time used the situation to drop the energy shield, sending a cascade of salt around us that distracted her just long enough. I drove Uriel's blade into her stomach, even as she caught my arm with her other wing, impaling me and holding me, joining us together in a distorted lover's dance.

I know the Nicht Creidem started shooting then, no longer concerned with who they hit once they saw the position we were in.

I know that I closed my eyes, and in one of my last throes of power carried us across the country, to the middle of Central Park, where a light snow was falling.

I know we stood there together, looking into one another's eyes as I began pulling her power away from her, and pushing what remained back. The blade began to glow green, and I howled in

agony, biting, searing, endless agony, as I took away the stain that had covered her since the day she had been conceived, the Divine power of a union that was never meant to be, and never should have been.

I don't know how long that lasted either. For me, it felt like a millennia or more. It was infinite, endless, painful and at the same time exhilarating. It was as if all I had ever done was suddenly given purpose, and at the same time, my purpose was completely erased.

And then it was over.

Sarah's wings vanished, shrinking to nothing as her Divine power was removed. The redness of her eyes faded as well, leaving them a very plain, very human brown.

I fell to my knees in front of her, hardly able to contain the power I had absorbed. It was almost as much as I had held in the Box. Almost as much as the Beast had controlled. It left me feeling drunk and angry and joyful and sad.

I don't know if there was a better or worse feeling in existence.

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I stared up at her, and she stared back at me. Like Rebecca, her eyes ran with tears. Were they were joyful or sad?

"You're going to destroy it," she said, her voice meek. "You're going to destroy the world. Why do so many have to die? Why do the Divine get to decide?"

"Because that is the way He wants it," I replied. "That is the way He designed it. Right, wrong, it doesn't matter. If we want to continue, if we want to go on, we have to play by those rules."

"It isn't fair."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I guess we'll see."

"I'm cold," she said, shivering in her light tank top, low cut in the back to leave the wings she no longer had room to move.

I took off my coat, passing it to her. "Here."

She smiled. "Thank you. What happens now?"

"I thought you were the one with the visions."

"In the dreams, I always defeated you."

"Then why didn't you now?"

She shrugged. "I guess you wanted it more than I did."

Or maybe on a subconscious level, she hadn't wanted to win.

I got to my feet. "I'm going to take you home."

"To France?"

"No, to my apartment. Things are different now, Sarah. You're different. Do you believe in second chances?"

She nodded. "And third. I have to, or I'll fall apart."

I knew what she meant. I put my hand on her shoulder and transported us there.

"I'm sorry I killed Dante," she said, still crying.

"I know," I replied.

I brought her over to my couch. I could still smell Alyx in the room, and the thought of her made me both happy and sad. She had found what she was looking for, at least.

"Here, sit."

She did, grabbing one of the pillows and holding it close to her.

"I killed Brian, too," she said, the tears really starting to come.

I kneeled down in front of her and wiped a strand of hair from her face. "It's okay. Just sit back and relax."

"How am I supposed to live with this?" she asked, sounding as weak and pitiful as I had ever seen anything.

"You aren't," I replied.

I put my hand to her forehead.

I always had the power to make people forget and it was stronger now. So much stronger.

"Go to sleep for a while," I said to her, once it was done.

She closed her eyes, and I shifted her with the power, laying her out on the couch and putting a blanket over her.

I left her there, returning to the park. I needed time to absorb everything. The power, the implications. I needed time to think.

I found a bench facing the lake, now lightly frozen over. I took a seat, staring out at it. I let my mind wander. I knew what I had to do. I knew that it was almost time.

Almost.

Something was missing.

I could feel it in my soul. An emptiness that I hadn't noticed before. A black hole that no amount of power could fill.

I leaned my head back, looking to the sky for answers. Not that I expected any to come from there.

Two hours passed. I didn't move. I didn't breathe. I just sat, letting the power settle, letting myself come to terms with all that I

already knew. My journey had come to an end. My story was nearly written. It would be over soon. On one hand, I was ready. On the other, I didn't want it to happen.

No man was ever meant to hold the power I was holding. It was true when I had taken it from the Beast, and it was true now. Only this time, there was no keeping some. There was no going back. There was only me, the universe, and God.

I felt her presence even as she descended, coming down from the Heavens in a flash of light. I wasn't surprised they had sent someone to urge me along. I was surprised they had sent her.

"Landon," Josette said, appearing in front of the bench. She was still in her older form, beautiful in her simplicity.

"Josette," I replied.

"Can I sit?"

"Of course."

She came and sat beside me.

"I did it," I said.

"I know. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me."

"Even so."

"I'm glad you came."

"So am I."

I turned to face her, looking into her eyes. There was a light there. A peacefulness. In an instant, I felt the black hole in my soul begin to resolve into something wonderful.

"How are things going in Heaven?"

"Settled, now. You proved He still cares."

"I did?"

"Yes. Does that surprise you?"

"Shouldn't it? He went through a lot of trouble to save humanity."

"Exactly."

I smiled. She smiled back. We sat together in silence for a little while, enjoying one another's company.

"I know I can't keep it," I said at last.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't that why they sent you? To make sure I do what I have to do?"

"Not exactly."

"Why then?" I asked, confused.

“Landon, I. I prayed to Him. I asked Him to allow me to come.”

“You did? Why?”

“Do you still have the sword?”

It was resting against the bench beside me. I looked at her. “You aren’t suggesting?”

“I prayed to Him. I asked for time to spend with my daughter. With my family. He granted my request.” She stared hard into my eyes. “Use the sword on me, Landon.”

“Josette,” I started to say in protest.

“The answer to my prayers, Landon. Please.”

I nodded solemnly. We both stood, and I sank only the very tip of the blade into her. She smiled as I pulled the Divine energy out and replaced it, her smile only growing bigger as she became mortal once more.

“Thank you,” she said.

I nodded. “You’re welcome.”

“Now, Landon, break the sword. Shatter it into dust and spread it to the stars. Let it carry the power you have claimed with it. Set it all free to the universe.”

I didn’t question. I simply did as she asked, using my power to pulverize the blade, and turn it into glowing, silvery dust. I held it with my power, gathering it close, swirling it around me and pushing the power out into it with finality. It turned around me, glowing brighter and brighter as more of the energy joined with it and it began floating toward the sky.

I don’t know how long it took. An hour? Two? As the power fled I began to feel colder and colder, my energy fleeing with it.

I was shivering as the last of the dust began to drift into the air, vanishing into the night. I looked at Josette. She was shivering too.

“I didn’t die,” I said, surprised but not surprised.

“No,” she replied.

“I’m mortal again, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“So are you.”

“Yes.”

I felt a lump in my throat. I pushed it down. There was no reason to be nervous.

“Josette,” I said.

She smiled as if she already knew what I was going to say.

“Yes?”

“I know this is going to sound strange, considering everything that just happened but… will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

I moved to her, taking her in a solid, loving embrace. We kissed once, a simple kiss.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too.”

How many people ever got to spend the rest of their life with someone whose soul had literally been one with theirs?

“It’s cold,” she said.

“Yeah, I’m cold, too. Let’s go home.” She looked at me sideways, and I smiled. We weren't married yet, and she was still a former angel. “I have two apartments.”

She smiled in return, blushing beautifully. “Then yes, let us go home.”

We started walking through the park, holding hands. It was cold, but we would live.

“So, what happens now?” I asked.

“Life goes on,” she replied. “As it always has.”

"Not as it always has," I said, gripping her hand a little tighter. "Better than that."

Let Heaven and Hell have their war. The world would keep turning, and the balance would always turn with it. Maybe one day a long, long time in the future, humankind would need someone to fight for them again. But not now, and definitely not me.

I was going home.

* * *

THE END.

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Thank you

First, thank you, thank you, thank you for picking up and reading Divine. I know you have a million choices for books to read, and I'm grateful you not only decided to give it a try, but also made it through to this page.

Balance was the first novel I ever published. When I initially put it on Amazon, I was hoping to sell a few copies, and maybe get five reviews.

Fast-forward seven years, and I've now written over 50 novels, sold over a million books, earned thousands of reviews, and gone on to enjoy an unexpectedly successful career as an author. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine Balance, and this series, would lead to something so much bigger. These books have even been translated and sold on bookstore shelves in Germany! How awesome is that?

And how awesome are you for reading this now?

Answer: Indescribably awesome. I honestly can't thank you enough.

Cheers,

Michael.

P.S. If you enjoyed this series, make sure to check out some of my other work. Just flip to the next page.

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Other Books By M.R Forbes

M.R. Forbes on Amazon
mrforbes.co m/books

Necromancer - The Complete Series
mrforbes. com/ necromancer

Everybody hates necromancers.

Death magic? It's disgusting.

And dangerous.

For Conor, it's also the skill that pays the bills. The medication that keeps him cancer free is expensive, and he's terrified to die.

He should be. Death doesn't like being played.

When the promise of a big payout for a small bit of thievery presents itself, Conor is all in. But nothing comes easy when magic is involved, and it isn't long before he's caught up in the machinations of the most powerful wizards on Earth and left with only two ways out:

Will he cheat Death?

Or meet him?

Forgotten (The Forgotten)
mrforbes. com/ theforgotten

Some things are better off FORGOTTEN.

Sheriff Hayden Duke was born on the Pilgrim, and he expects to die on the Pilgrim, like his father, and his father before him.

That's the way things are on a generation starship centuries from home. He's never questioned it. Never thought about it. And why bother? Access points to the ship's controls are sealed, the systems that guide her automated and out of reach. It isn't perfect, but he has all he needs to be content.

Until a malfunction forces his Engineer wife to the edge of the habitable zone to inspect the damage.

Until she contacts him, breathless and terrified, to tell him she

found a body, and it doesn't belong to anyone on board.

Until he arrives at the scene and discovers both his wife and the body are gone.

The only clue? A bloody handprint beneath a hatch that hasn't opened in hundreds of years.

Until now.

Earth Unknown (Forgotten Earth)
mrforbes.com/e arthunk nown

A desperate escape to the most dangerous planet in the universe... Earth.

Nathan's wife is murdered. The police believe he's the killer, and why wouldn't they? He's a disgraced Centurion Marine pilot, an ex-con, and an employee of the most powerful crime syndicate on Proxima.

The evidence is damning. The truth, not as clear. If Nathan wants to prove his innocence and avenge his wife, he'll have to complete the most desperate evasive maneuver of his life:

Steal a starship and escape to Earth.

He thinks he'll be safe there. He's wrong.

Very wrong.

Earth isn't what he thinks. Not even close. What he doesn't know isn't only likely to kill him, it's eager to kill him.

If it doesn't?

The Sheriff will.

Deliverance (Forgotten Colony)
mrforbes. com/ deliverance

The war is over. Earth is lost. Running is the only option.

It may already be too late.

Caleb is a former Marine Raider and commander of the Vultures, a search and rescue team that's spent the last two years pulling high-value targets out of alien-ravaged cities and shipping them off-world.

When his new orders call for him to join forty-thousand survivors aboard the last starship out, he thinks his days of fighting are over. The Deliverance represents a fresh start and a chance to

leave the war behind for good.

Except the war won't be as easy to escape as he thought.

And the colony will need a man like Caleb more than he ever imagined...

Starship Eternal (War Eternal)
mrforbes. com/ starshipeternal

They are coming. Find the Goliath or be destroyed.

The chilling words are the first thing Space Marine starfighter pilot Mitchell “Ares” Williams hears after he is nearly killed. He tries to ignore them, convinced the voice in his head is a side-effect of his injuries.

It isn’t.

The warning is only the beginning. A glimpse into a struggle against an enemy older than time.

An enemy that’s very real and much closer than he ever imagined.

An enemy that will do whatever it takes to keep him from finding the centuries lost starship and ending not only the fight but their very existence.

Narrowly escaping capture, Mitchell falls into the hands of the Riggers — a ragtag crew of black-ops commandos who patrol the outer reaches of the galaxy. Guided by a captain with a reputation for murder, they’re dangerous, immoral, and possibly insane.

They may also be humanity’s last hope for survival in a war that has raged beyond eternity.

(War Eternal is also available in a box set of the first three books here: mrforbes. com/ wareternalbox)

Hell’s Rejects (Chaos of the Covenant)
mrforbes.com/ hellsrejects

The most powerful starships ever constructed are gone. Thousands are dead. A fleet is in ruins. The attackers are unknown. The orders are clear: *Recover the ships. Bury the bastards who stole them.*

Lieutenant Abigail Cage never expected to find herself in Hell. As a Highly Specialized Operational Combatant, she was one of the most respected Marines in the military. Now she's doing hard labor

on the most miserable planet in the universe.

Not for long.

The Earth Republic is looking for the most dangerous individuals it can control. The best of the worst, and Abbey happens to be one of them. The deal is simple: *Bring back the starships, earn your freedom. Try to run, you die.* It's a suicide mission, but she has nothing to lose.

The only problem? There's a new threat in the galaxy. One with a power unlike anything anyone has ever seen. One that's been waiting for this moment for a very, very, long time. And they want Abbey, too.

Be careful what you wish for.

They say Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. They have no idea.

Man of War (Rebellion)
mrforbes.com/manofwar

In the year 2280, an alien fleet attacked the Earth.
Their weapons were unstoppable, their defenses unbreakable.
Our technology was inferior, our militaries overwhelmed.
Only one starship escaped before civilization fell.
Earth was lost.
It was never forgotten.
Fifty-two years have passed.
A message from home has been received.
The time to fight for what is ours has come.
Welcome to the rebellion.

Tears of Blood (Books 1-3)
mrforbes. com/ tearsofblood

One thousand years ago, the world was broken and reborn beneath the boot of a nameless, ageless tyrant. He erased all history of the time before, enslaving the people and hunting those with the power to unseat him.

The power of magic.

Eryn is such a girl. Born with the Curse, she fights to control and conceal it to protect those she loves. But when the truth is revealed,

and his Marines come, she is forced away from her home and into the company of Silas, a deadly fugitive tormented by a fractured past.

Silas knows only that he is a murderer who once hunted the Cursed, and that he and his brothers butchered armies and innocents alike to keep the deep, dark secrets of the time before from ever coming to light.

Secrets which could save the world.

Or destroy it completely.

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About the Author

M.R. Forbes is the mind behind a growing number of Amazon best-selling science fiction series including Rebellion, War Eternal, Chaos of the Covenant, and the Forgotten Universe novels. He currently resides with his family and friends on the west cost of the United States, including a cat who thinks she's a dog and a dog who thinks she's a cat.

He maintains a true appreciation for his readers and is always happy to hear from them.

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